Redressing or Reproducing Inequalities? Narrative accounts of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in South African higher education

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Declaration of Originality

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this is my own original work and that all fieldwork was undertaken by me. Any part of this study that does not reflect my own ideas has been fully acknowledged in the form of citations. No part of this thesis has been submitted in the past , or is being submitted , or is to be submitted for a degree at any other university.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma (Msholozi) and all military veterans of uMkhonto we Sizwe, the spear of our nation and the military wing of our liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC).

Thank you for sacrificing your youth in service of our future.

The struggle continues.

Abstract

Post-apartheid South Africa entrusted the country's higher education sector with a historic and supreme task: to break the cycle of poverty and redress the socio-economic legacy of colonialism and apartheid that has polarized South Africa into one of the most unequal nations in the world. In response to this mammoth task, the democratic government established the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), a national loan and grant scheme aimed at providing undergraduate students from poor and working-class households with increased access to higher education. Regrettably, the rise in access has occurred alongside high dropout rates and low completion rates amongst NSFAS funded working-class students, with over two thirds of NSFAS funded students dropping out without a qualification. This scale of non-completion amongst working-class students undermines the very idea of higher education as a vehicle to achieve a more equitable and socially just South Africa.

Specifically, my study shines the research spotlight on high non-completion and low completion rates amongst working-class students as an ever-present dimension of persistent inequality in higher education , and one that undermines the very idea of higher education as a vehicle to achieve more equitable and socially just societies. With working-class students having largely been theorized through reproductive and deficit lens, not enough attention has gone to the voice from the working-class margins and the value it offers to the higher education transformation project. I examine narratives of NSFAS funded working-class graduates and dropouts, university mangers, policy makers , academic and support staff on their experiences of completion and non-completion and how insights from these experiences can enrich the transformation and widen participation project in South African higher education and elsewhere in the world.

My research illuminates the often overlooked resourceful and transformative side of working-class students, in their journeys to and through higher education. I reconstruct and illuminate a timeline of reproductive and transformative dimensions of working-class students' origins, their pathways en route higher education and higher education experiences, and how these phases are woven in ways that hinder and/or enable success in higher education. My findings suggest that theorizing working-class students as inherently deficient presents pitfalls in Bourdieu's reproduction theory in ways that miss opportunities for transformation. This research contributes to the work of university managers and policymakers tasked with improving working-class students' higher education experience and to prevent higher education policies from becoming instruments for creating the very inequalities they were designed to prevent.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

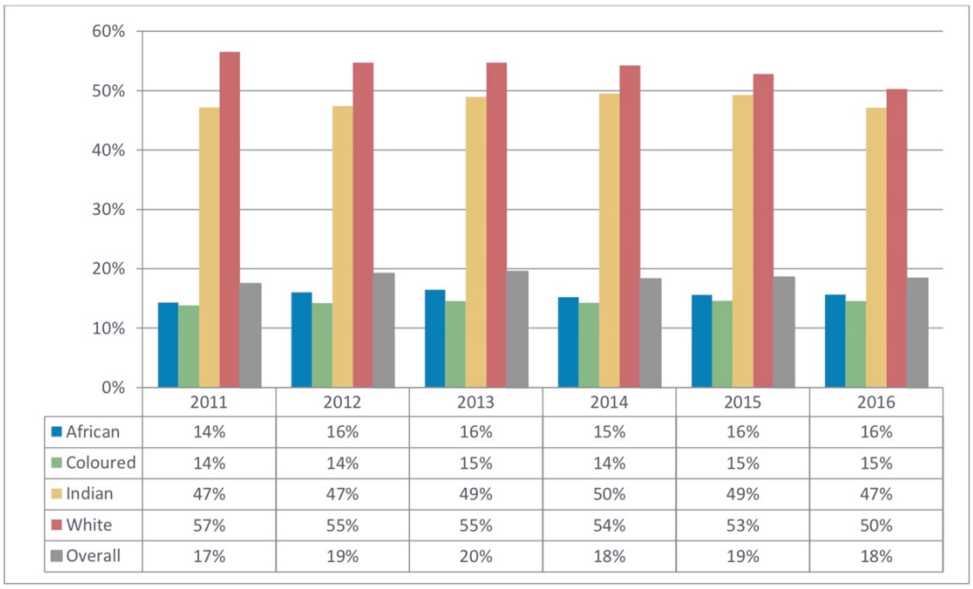
1.1 Higher Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Transformation and Redress

Post-apartheid South Africa entrusted higher education with the country's historic and supreme task: to break the cycle of poverty and redress the socio-economic legacy of apartheid that has polarized South Africa into one of the most unequal nations in the world (DHET, 2010; National Planning Commission, 2011). Central to the South Africa's 1997 White Paper on Higher Education , titled *a Programme for Higher Education Transformation*, is the call for a post-apartheid higher education system to be transformed in order to redress past inequalities, to serve a new post-apartheid social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities (DOE, 1997). In response to this mammoth task, the democratic government established the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), a national loan and grant scheme aimed at providing undergraduate students from poor and working-class households with access to higher education, as one of the tools to transform higher education in South Africa (DHET,2010).

Over two decades since the fall of apartheid, patterns of access to higher education continue to reflect the South Africa's inherited race and class inequalities (CHE, 2018). Despite the marginal improvement in widening access to tertiary education, South Africa's higher education attainment rate remains the lowest in all OECD countries (OECD, 2019). The poor and working class remain underrepresented, with NSFAS funding less that 25% of the university student population by 2017 (NSFAS, 2017). The underrepresentation of working-class students is particularly prevalent in highly selective elite universities. Therefore, while post-apartheid higher education policies have transformed the racial composition of the university student population, it has also contributed to the reproduction and reinforcement of apartheid era class disparities (Kapp and Bangeni, 2017).

A five year cohort study by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), a body established to provide advice to the Minister of Higher Education and Training on all higher education matters, reported persistent racial inequality in access to higher education, with white youth far more likely to access higher education that their black counterparts (CHE, 2018). This is illustrated in the figure below:

Figure 1: Proportion of population age cohort (participation rates) by race between 2011 and 2016



	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
African	14%	16%	16%	15%	16%	16%
Coloured	14%	14%	15%	14%	15%	15%
Indian	47%	47%	49%	50%	49%	47%
White	57%	55%	55%	54%	53%	50%
Overall	17%	19%	20%	18%	19%	18%

(Source: Council on Higher Education, 2018)

Walton, Bowman and Osman (2015) strongly attribute the racial disparities in higher education participation rates to South Africa's two tiered schooling system that continues to advantage privileged youth and disadvantage those born in historically marginalised communities. On the one hand, is a system made up of well-resourced former white and Indian only schools that produce students who meet the university entrance requirements and are well prepared for post-schooling opportunities. On the other hand , is a largely under resourced schooling system that enrols the majority of black poor and working class youth , an large proportion of whom fail to meet the increasingly highly selective university entrance requirements (CHE, 2018).

Similarly, completion rates in South African higher education also reflect the country's racial and class disparities. A 2014 report by the Council on Higher Education reported

> Only 28 per cent of students enrolled in a 3-year degree programme in 2007 graduated in the expected time. Of these 'on-time' graduates, 42 per cent were white students, 26 per cent were Indian, 19 per cent black African and 23 per cent 'coloured'. By the end of 2012, a cumulative percentage of 56 per cent of those enrolled in 2007 had graduated (CHE 2014, 62–63).

Regrettably, the marginal rise in access by NSFAS funded working-class students has occurred alongside very high dropout rates and low completion rates amongst this group of students, a reality that undermines higher education's very developmental mandate. The 2011 report of the

Department of Higher Education and Training's Ministerial Committee on the review of the NSFAS revealed that of the 656 000 students funded through NSFAS by the year 2010 67% were no longer in higher education. Of this 67%, 72% dropped out without completing their studies and only 28% graduated (DHET, 2010). More recent data by the Presidency's *25 Year Review Report* suggest that picture has worsened (The Presidency, 2019). High non-completion and low completion rates amongst working-class students undermines the very idea of higher education as a vehicle to achieve more equitable and socially just South Africa. The impact of the high university dropout rates of financial aid students in South Africa is particularly tragic as it contributes towards the revolving door of poverty, inequality and unemployment and reinforce the socio-economic legacy of years of colonialism and apartheid (NPC, 2011).

South Africa's *National Development Plan Vision 2030*, *the National Students Financial Aid Act* and *the Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training of 2012*, all identify improving access and success trends of working-class students and the transformation of the higher education sector as an apex priority. They have all bestowed on higher education the task of alleviating the triple threat of poverty, unemployment and inequality. The levels of student attrition in relation to the grand responsibility bestowed on post-apartheid higher education calls for on-going conversations in an effort to deepen our understanding of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in South African higher education. My study joins this conversation.

1.2. Rationale and Study Objectives

In joining these conversations two noticeable gaps exist: first, working-class students having largely been theorized through reproductive and deficit lens, the focus has largely gone to understanding what they lack and how to help them fit or assimilate into higher education with little regard for what they bring and offer to efforts that seek to transform and widen participation in higher education (Crozier and Reay, 2011). Specifically, in much of Bordieuan work, the effect of working-class students' social and cultural origins is mostly theorized as a constraint to their overall higher education experience and outcomes. Working-class graduates are largely considered an exception to the dropout norm (Arbouin, 2018). This subordination has, in turn, made working-class students in higher education prone to feel inadequate, illegitimate, and to view their failure as inevitable (Mallman, 2017). Mallman (2017, p. 325) adopts the legal term "*inherent vice*, describe a process in which individuals and institutions are disposed to viewing lower levels of cultural

capital in working-class students as an indication of their 'natural' inferiority, rather than as disadvantages of inheritable, symbolic resources".

Secondly, and as a result of the first gap, not enough attention is paid to the voice from the working-class margins, and the value it offers to efforts that seek to deepen our understanding of the challenge of high dropout rates and low completion rates in higher education. The predominately reproductive outlook on the working-class has perpetuated a trend in higher education studies to treat working-class students as a group that has little to offer and that must somehow be supported and 'cured' of the working-class attributes that hinder their educational experiences and odds of success. Thus, the solution to weak higher education attainment amongst working class students has been sought from everywhere else but this group of students.

Although they remain a minority (DHET, 2019), the experiences of working-class graduates remain an interesting and potentially transformative area of inquiry (Mills, 2008). Work on successful working-class experiences in education by Yosso (2005), Crozier & Reay (2011), Mills (2008), Arbouin (2018) and others, draw our attention to the potentially resourceful and transformative side working class students in higher education. This line of inquiry has caught our attention too. How do working class graduates narrate their experiences of completion at different South African universities? And within the context of our efforts to transform and widen participation in higher education, how can their narrative accounts deepen our understanding social disparities in patterns of educational attainment? In a system supposedly transforming towards greater equity and justice, what about South Africa's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their different learning contexts and practices diminish or enhance working class students' odds of successful completion? Insights from my study gets us a step closer to an improved understanding of ways in which post-apartheid South African higher education, as it continues to evolve, reproduce or redress the class, race and gender-based inequalities.

My study aimed to explore and gain an in-depth and enriched understanding of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in South African higher education by listening to narrative accounts and perspectives of working-class graduates and dropouts, university managers, administrators, policy makers, student leaders, academic and support staff at different South African HEIs. I follow a narrative inquiry methodology and seek to build on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction in higher education. Data was collected through narrative interviews with working class dropouts, working class dropouts, university managers, student

leaders, policy makers, academic and support staff in order to generate rich insights and in an attempt to give voice to perspectives often overlooked.

My study departs from the common tradition of using the middle- and upper-class students as a control group when studying working class students' experiences of higher education. Although non-completion rates are particularly higher amongst NSFAS funded working-class students in South Africa (DHET, 2010), there are pockets of unlikely successes within this group of students, the unlikely working-class graduates. Denoting that, although this group of students shares similar social origins attributes and are admitted into the NSFAS financial aid programme on a similar criterion, their higher education experience is far from homogeneous and should be treated as such. Looking into working class graduates' experiences of completion in higher education has the potential to shed light on dimensions of their higher education journey and experiences potentially enabling successful completion. The significance of zooming into working class students' lived experiences in higher education is particularly emphasized by Quinn et al (2005), Reay (2009) and Crozier and Reay (2011) amongst others.

My interest in examining working class experiences of completion and non-completion in South Africa has been inspired by my personal journey as a working-class graduate and my institutional experiences at different South African universities. During my undergraduate studies in South Africa I participated in a research project that exposed me to the prevalence of food insecurity amongst financial aid students and how this affected their progression in higher education. Additionally, during my term of office as President of the Student Union at one of the highly selective and elite universities, I became increasingly aware of on and off campus realities potentially limiting the odds of working class students successfully completing their studies through stories told by students, student leaders, lecturers, university managers and various other players within the field of university education in South Africa. As a working-class student, I increasingly developed an interest in studying the varied experiences of educational attainment amongst fellow working-class students in higher education, and this is what led me to this research project.

Anecdotal narrative accounts of success and failure I heard from individuals carried in them two key observations that subsequently inspired this research project. Firstly, the stories were both diverse and personal, denoting the complexity of the challenge of inequality in educational attainment. Secondly, I believed that from these narratives, if studied closely, potentially valuable

lessons could be learned and operationalized in a manner that contribute towards the work of university managers, policy makers, academic and support staff as well as working class students themselves. In other words, I felt that by listening to narrative accounts of working class students and key members of the South African higher education community who work with these students, we stand a good chance of getting a step closer to an improved and enriched understanding of the reproductive and transformative dimensions of the South African field of university education.

Data is primarily collected at three universities that represent three board categories of universities in post-apartheid South Africa. Chapter two of this thesis will elaborate on the history and key features of these three categories of universities.

1.3 Research Questions

Specifically, the study aimed to address the following research questions:

- How do working class students narrate their experiences of completion and non-completion at different South African Universities?

- How do key stakeholders in the South African higher education construct working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at different HEIs?

- What are the strengths and limitations of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction in aiding an improved understanding of factors potentially contributing to the low completion rates and high dropout rates of undergraduate financial aid students at different universities in South Africa?

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature and locate working class completion and non-completion in higher education within the context of persistent inequality of access, experience and attainment that has paralleled the growth of the sector from elite to mass systems of higher education. In chapter 3 I outline and justify my preferred theoretical framework: Bourdieu's reproduction theory.

Chapter 4 outlines my study's methodological choices, influences and justifications. Chapter 5 reports on narrative accounts of completion from five working-class graduates. Chapter 6 reports on narrative accounts of non-completion from 5 dropouts. Chapter 7 and 8 reports on narratives of university managers, administrators, students' leaders, academic and support staff, and their lived experiences and perspectives on working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at different South African HEIs. Chapter 9 brings together and synthesize the study's major findings, contributions and limitations under a concluding discussion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

We have proclaimed our faith in education as a means of equalizing the conditions of men. But there is grave danger that our present policy will make it an instrument for creating the very inequalities it was designed to prevent. If the ladder of educational opportunity rises high at the doors of some youth and scarcely rises at all at the doors of others, while at the same time formal education is made a prerequisite to occupational and social advance, then education may become the means, not of eliminating race and class distinctions, but of deepening and solidifying them. It is obvious, that free and universal access to education, in terms of the interest, ability, and need of the student, must be a major goal in American education.

President Harry S. Truman, 1947

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, working class completion and non-completion in higher education is situated within the context of persistent inequality of access, experience and attainment that has paralleled the growth of higher education from elite to mass systems of higher education (Boliver, 2017). The prevalence of high non-completion and low completion rates amongst working class students is outlined as an ever-present dimension of persistent inequality in higher education and one that undermines the notion of higher education as a vehicle to achieve more equitable and socially just societies (Blossfeld and Shavit, 1993; Quinn, 2004; Long, 2018; Boliver, 2017). Different theoretical perspectives on student completion and non-completion in higher education are critically reviewed, gaps in the literature identified and my study's potential contribution is located. I then present and justify South African higher education as an ideal research context to explore the strengths and limitations of Bourdieu's reproduction theory in aiding an improved understanding of high non-completion rates and low completion rates amongst financial aid funded working class students , given the country's on-going working class 'dropout bloodbath'. Overall, the literature reviewed agitate for more effort to be dedicated towards an improved understanding inequality of attainment that moves from common deficit outlook on working-class students to institutional critique and recognition of working-class students' resourcefulness in HE.

2.2 From elite to mass higher education and beyond

The overall growth of the higher education sector followed the post-world war two rapid expansion from small and exclusive elite systems to mass systems of higher education (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). Higher Education massification and the extension of participation to previously excluded groups, of which working class students are a part of, carried with it the promise and ambition to "ameliorate socioeconomic inequalities by providing a ladder of opportunity for those from poorer backgrounds" (Boliver ,2017, p423). Therefore, when studying the experiences and outcomes of working-class students in higher education today, it is worthwhile to look back at some of the earlier thinking that informed the movement from elite to mass higher education. This important because working class students are not only part of the previously marginalised communities, in *Miseducation,* Reay (2017) detail how this group of students remains on the receiving end of injustice in their journeys to and through higher education.

Traditionally, higher education was small in size and reserved for a few elite white males in much of the industrialised world. It was the post-World War II period that triggered a rapid and well-documented expansion of higher education in most of the industrialised western countries (Schofer & Meyer 2015; Boliver, 2017). In the United States, where much of the initial growth in university and college student enrolments occurred, the move towards higher education massification primarily sought to skill or reskill war veterans in order to incorporate them into an evolving labour market and economy (Trow, 1973). The expansion of the sector has been massive and rapid. The United Kingdom moved from 130 000 students in 1962 to over 2 million students in 2018 (Schofer & Meyer 2015; HESA, 2018). The UK government now aims to have at least 50% of school leaving youth enrol in higher education (Quinn, 2004).

The transition from elite to mass higher education has however been accompanied by a myriad of challenges. Martin Trow (1973) highlighted that the post-World War II transition from elite to mass higher education had brought with it challenges regarding: how it ought to be funded, governed , and administered; how students would be recruited and selected ; the nature of curriculum , instruction and qualifications awarded; the relationship between schooling and tertiary sector, and students' housing and their overall higher education experience. Both Europe and the United States responded to these challenges by developing highly stratified systems of higher education that channelled categories of students into varied post schooling paths (Long, 2018). Inequality of educational experience and attainment has, however, persisted (Boliver 2011; Long, 2018).

From inception, the growth of the higher education sector occurred unevenly between and within countries (World Bank, 2017). The growth of the higher education sector occurred rapidly in more industrialised western nations than it did in developing countries (Goolam, 2008). Although the growth of sector has gradually spread beyond the western world, the picture remains far from equal. On the lower end of the spectrum, Asia's higher education sector has made significant growth strides in recent decades, with much of the African continent legging behind (World Bank, 2017). A study into the effects of massification on higher education in Africa by Goolam (2008) found the higher education gross enrolment ratio in several African countries to rarely surpass 5%.

The picture remains particularly bleak in Sub-Saharan Africa, a region that has one of the lowest higher education gross enrollment ratios in the world (World Bank, 2017). Like in many parts of the world, the growing appreciation of the significance of a higher education qualification in social and occupational advancement is fuelling the region's growing demand for higher education as reported by the world bank in 2017. However, both Goolam (2008) and the World Bank (2017) caution that this upsurge in demand for university education in Sub-Saharan Africa is taking place against a weak higher education base , inadequate funding and without the necessary investment in infrastructure and human resources , a reality that continues undermine the supply of higher education and adversely affect the students learning experiences.

The growing demand and projected growth of higher education in sub-Saharan (World Bank, 2017) , against the stated backdrop of weak public investment in the sector , has created a supply gap that is gradually being occupied by private higher education providers. Consequently, a neoliberal conception of higher education as a private good is gradually presenting an alternative to public higher education and the notion of a public good (McCowan, 2012; Unterhalter et al, 2018). This neoliberal wave is characterised by declining government spending, competition, deregulation, privatization and the dominance of the logic of the markets. The impact and consequences of the growth of private higher education providers and increased commodification of higher education on working class students remains a subject of much debate in higher education policy making circles (Gelb, 2003; Unterhalter et al, 2018).

Moreover, this growing marketization of higher education brings us to the overall conundrum facing higher education today i.e. the global growth in size and number of students in higher education has neither resulted in more equitable higher education experiences nor societies, the

opposite has been the case (Shavit and Blossfeld ,1993; Brown et al, 2013; Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Boliver, 2017; Reay, 2017). Subsequent to the uneven rate of higher education expansion and massification between countries, there has been persistent inequalities within countries. As university enrolments continued to grow, so has the socio-economic gap between the working classes and the privileged middle and upper classes (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). In their famous study *Persistent Inequality: Changing Educational Attainment in Thirteen Countries,* Shavit and Blossfeld (1993) found that, despite massive expansion of the higher education sector social origin-related disparities in educational attainment remained stubbornly stable. Several others continue to echo Shavit and Blossfeld's findings (Reimer and Pollak, 2009; Chesters and Watson, 2013; Reay, 2017; Long, 2018).

2.3 Persistent inequality in higher education

It is generally acknowledged that the era of massification and expansion of the higher education sector has been paralleled by persistent social inequalities (Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Boliver, 2017; Reay, 2017). As Vickie Boliver (2010, p229) puts it, social inequalities in higher education has been both "maximally and effectively maintained". Three dimensions of inequality in higher education are prominently ventilated in the literature: *inequality of access* (Jerrim et al, 2015; Boliver, 2013; Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Polikoff et al, 2019) , *inequality of experience* (Yorke & Thomas, 2003; Naidoo, 2004; Clayton et al, 2009; Reay 2017; Arbouin, 2018) and *inequality of attainment or outcomes* (Quinn, 2004; Quinn et al, 2005; Alam, 2007; Papay et al, 2015; BBC, 2017; The Guardian, 2017; Long, 2018).

The OECD's 2018 *Education at a Glance Report* joins Boliver (2017) , Reay, (2017), and Long (2018) in highlighting the prevalence of persistent class, ethnic and gender-based inequalities in students' higher education aspirations, the type of university and field of study accessed, institutional experiences and their odds of attainment. In the main, it is working class children who are trailing their privileged counterparts in in their experience of higher education (Reay, 2017). The working class grow up in families and communities with very low higher education awareness , aspirations and participation rates , their higher education options are limited and sometimes non-existent (Reay et al, 2001; Boliver, 2017) , they go through violently turbulent and disparaging higher education experiences (Yorke and Thomas, 2003; Lehmann, 2007) and their odds of successfully completing their studies are significantly diminished when compared to their privileged counterparts (Quinn, 2004; Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Long, 2018).

2.3.1 Inequality of access

Parallel to the growth and expansion of the higher education sector, there has been growing concerns about persistent inequality of access to higher education despite strong policy commitments to massifying access beyond the elite (Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Boliver, 2013; Long, 2018). As a result, significant research work has gone into efforts aimed at expanding access to higher education to students from communities that have previously been excluded or underrepresented in higher education. Groups underrepresented in the sector included, but are not limited to, mature students, low income students and students from ethnic minority communities. Despite the concerted efforts and strong policy commitments to widening participation, inequality of access has persisted (Boliver, 2013).

In their international study of *First Gener*ation *entry into higher education,* Liz Thomas and Jocey Quinn (2007) identified country specific trends that influence patterns of unequal access to higher education. In Germany they found students' social origin and parents' educational status to significantly influence who goes to university, with two-thirds of children of graduates making it to higher education when compared to an absolute minority of children of fathers holding a lower secondary certificate. In Sweden, despite making up 35% of the population, students from working-class families constituted only 25% of university entrants whilst children of upper-class families , who constituted 18% of the Swedish population , accounted for 25% of university entrants. Similarly, despite the expansion of the Irish higher education sector social class disparities remained, with higher education participation rates disproportionately tilted in favour of students from wealthier sections of Ireland (Thomas and Quinn, 2007).

In England, the 2013 Milburn Report found that children of the middle and upper classes were three times more likely to access higher education that those living in the country's most underprivileged communities. This trend of class disparities in patterns of access to English higher education was reiterated the Sutton Trust's 2013 report on fair access to higher education in England. Australia's 2013 *Widening Participation in Australian Higher Education report* found children from low income families and communities to be significantly underrepresented at universities. The picture is reportedly similar in the United States, with inequality of access particularly prevalent along ethnic lines (Gale and Parker, 2013; Jerrim et al, 2015; Long, 2018).

The findings of these three reports support Liu (2011), Alvarado (2010), Polikoff et al, 2019 and many other who have strongly challenged the notion of meritocracy and fair access whereby the odds of one educational destination is detached from one's social origins. Being of working-class origin remains a predictable hinderance to accessing higher education (Haveman and Smeeding, 2006; Brown et al, 2013; Jerrim et al, 2015; Social Mobility Commission, 2016). Consequently, Polikoff et al (2019) are calling for doubling down in in efforts to widen access to previously excluded groups of students, whilst broadening the traditional understanding of access to higher education. Writing for *The Conversation*, Morgan Polikoff and colleagues (2019) identified the 'the myth of meritocracy in higher education' as a key factor behind persistent inequality of access and outcomes to higher education. They added:

The most damaging myth in American higher education is that college admissions is about merit, and that merit is about striving for -- and earning -- academic excellence. This myth is often used as a weapon against policies like affirmative action that offer minor admissions advantages to low-income students and racial and ethnic minorities. The deck is stacked in favor of affluent parents who use their privilege and exploit these institutional needs to find their children a way into elite colleges (Polikoff et al, 2019)

With much of the debate around inequality of access having focused on who gets to access higher education in general, Boliver (2013) and others suggest that we expand the scope of the debate from who goes to university to who goes to which university? Reay and colleagues (2001) added the question: who studies what at which university? This is particularly important given that inequality of access has been particularly striking in highly selective higher education institutions, with elite universities largely remaining a natural educational destination and preserve for children of the privileged middle and upper classes (Sutton Trust, 2013; Marginson, 2016). Drawing from the UK's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service data for the period 1996 to 2006, Vickie Boliver (2013, p1) found access to Russell Group Universities to be "far from fair". She found that:

Throughout this period, UCAS applicants from lower class backgrounds and from state schools remained much less likely to apply to Russell Group universities than their comparably qualified counterparts from higher class backgrounds and private schools, while Russell Group applicants from state schools and from Black and Asian ethnic backgrounds remained much less likely to receive offers of admission from Russell Group universities in comparison with their equivalently qualified peers from private schools and the White ethnic group (Boliver, 2013, p1).

Her findings shone the spotlight on what she argues is the inadequacy of widening participation policies and practitioners whose focus is disproportionately on merely encouraging more applications from traditionally excluded students without paying as much attention to how elite universities are treating applications from these groups of students.

For those from lower social class backgrounds, the unfairness appears to be largely to do with barriers of some kind to application to Russell Group universities given application to university at all. In contrast, for those from Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, the unfairness seems to stem entirely from some form of differential treatment during the admissions process by Russell Group universities. For those from state schools, however, unfair access to Russell Group universities seems to operate equally in relation to both application and admission (Boliver, 2013, p12).

2.3.2 Inequality of experience

'class matters because it creates unequal possibilities for flourishing and suffering' Sayer (2005, p128).

Beyond shaping their odds of accessing higher education, students' social origin follows them into higher education and facilitate unequal spatial, gendered and raced experiences of higher education. Working-class students who make it into higher education are said to go through a disproportionately turbulent and difficult experience when compared to their privileged counterparts (Clayton et al, 2009; Mallman, 2017; Bell and Santamaria, 2018; Mulrenan and Cox, 2018). Their higher education journey is marred "by a sense of their own illegitimacy, inadequacy, and insecurity and anxiety. Notably, these are the antithesis of the emotional assets arising from dominant-class backgrounds: entitlement, confidence, and security" (Mallman, 2017, p. 236). The additional burden of inadequate access to financial resources worsens their vulnerability to homelessness, food insecurity and related risks that significantly weaken their ability to reach their potential in higher education (Mulrenan et al, 2018).

The sense of illegitimacy and inadequacy amongst working class students is compounded by universities' institutional culture that looks at the struggles of working class students "as a fault in their 'natural' capability, and therefore not the responsibility , or within the capacity, of the institution to ameliorate" (Mallman, 2017,p.236). Drawing from Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field and habitus, Naidoo (2004) illustrate how, despite policies of inclusion and widening participation, higher education institutions continue to reproduce and maintain inequality of

educational experience. Due to their lack of idealized elite cultural capital attributes, and under the cloaks of meritocracy, working-class students are unjustly shunned as incompetent upon arrival in higher education, as higher education institutions continue to recognize, value and reward middle- and upper-class cultural attributes (Naidoo, 2004).

It is due to this clash between working class students' cultural capital (embodied, objectified and institutionalized) and what universities recognize and reward as merit, that working-class students are said to develop a sense of alienation and lack a of sense of belonging in way that makes them feel like a "fish out of water" (Grenfell, 2012). Their privileged counterparts are said to not only consider accessing university education a natural or obvious step for them, but upon enrolment they are more likely to feel like a "fish in water" as their habituses matches the logic of the field of higher education (Arbouin, 2018). At face value students from elite backgrounds seem brighter and smarter, however, a closer look, reproduction theorists argue, exposes the class bias that reproduce the inequality of experience in higher education (Reay, 2004; Arbouin, 2018).

From examining the life stories of twenty-six working-class graduates in Australia, Mallman (2017) found that the feeling of being a fish out of water also stemmed from working class students' disposition to feel intellectually inferior and their constant fear of failure in their journeys through higher education. He posits that working-class students tend to diminish themselves and deem challenges they face in higher education institutions "as indicative of their natural inferiority" (Mallman, 2017, p. 237). HEIs tend to make this group of students feel inadequate, so much so that the students define themselves "as the established order defines them" (Bourdieu, 1984, p 471). This inequality of experience is then maintained by HEIs' rewarding of elite cultural capital that are masked as talent and competence (Naidoo, 2004; Mallman, 2017; Arbouin, 2018).

2.3.3 Inequality of attainment

Of particular importance to my study is inequality of attainment in higher education, particularly the prevalence of high non-completion and low-completion rates amongst working class students at different HEIs (Liang & Robinson, 2003; Quinn, 2004; Larsen et al, 2013). Efforts to transform and widen participation in higher education have been significantly undermined by the prevalence of non-completion amongst the student population (HESA, 2018). Quinn, (2004, p58) cautioned that England's ideal of higher education as "a vital part of expanding opportunity and promoting social justice" was being undermined by rising non-completion rates across the student population in general and amongst working class students in particular. This was reinforced by the HESA

Non-continuation Report which bemoaned the rise of non-completion rates in 2018. Similarly, drawing from data by the National Center for Education Statistics at the United States Department of Education, Long (2018) found high non-completion rates to pose a significant threat to both students and the American higher education as a whole. While significant variations exist between the different types of higher education institutions in the US, the overall completion rate stood at less than half of the student population at four-year universities and 38.6% at two-year colleges (Long, 2018).

Studies into the inequality of attainment in higher education have particularly lamented the social class inequalities in patterns of attainment in higher education, with students from high-income families are far more likely to successfully complete their studies when compared to their working-class counterparts Powdthavee and Vignoles, 2009; Arc Network, 2013; HEFCE, 2017; Long, 2018). This has been seen by Boliver (2017) as a direct antithesis to policies of transformation and widening participation in higher education . In the United States, the Pell Institute (2008) found that after six years of university 43% of low-income students, most of whom are first-generation students, had dropped out of college without completing their studies. Only 11% of low-income students had completed a bachelor's degree, compared to 55% of their counterparts from high income families. In England, a study published by the higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) in 2017 indicated that low income students were a lot more likely to drop out of university when compared to their privileged middle and upper-class counterparts. The high non-completion and low completion rate of working-class students stalls transformation and reinforce the vicious cycle of socio-economic inequality and social injustice that higher education has been tasked to redress (Quin et al, 2005; Bangeni & Kapp, 2018; Long, 2018). A 2018 report by the National Union of Students (NUS) in the UK equated working-class students' experiences in higher education institutions to payment of a punitive "poverty premium" (NUS, 2018). All this evidence justifies research that zooms into and further explore dimensions of completion and non-completion amongst working class students in order to contribute towards this growing challenge in higher education.

Beyond the social class disparities, other dimensions of inequality of attainment include variations that exist between type of institution, years and fields of study (Long, 2018; HESA, 2018). Firstly, a considerable number of students tend to dropout of university in their first year of study. The 2018 Higher Education Statistics Agency Report on non-continuation of students in England revealed that 26 000 of English first entrants dropped without enrolling for their second year of

study. The report indicates that as much as 16.6% of English full time first entrants in 2015/16 academic year dropped out before their second year of study. Secondly, major variations exist between highly selective elite universities and comprehensive universities, with elite universities achieving higher completion rates than comprehensive universities (Yorke and Thomas, 2003; Pell Institute, 2008; HESA, 2018). For example, in the same year, the dropout rate at first year of study was 19.5% at the comprehensive London Metropolitan University compared to a dropout rate of less than 1% at highly selective and elite Cambridge University (HESA,2018). Thirdly, Smith and Naylor (2001) added that students enrolled in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programmes are reported to achieve lower completion rates compared to other fields of study.

The three dimensions of inequality in higher education I have outlined above (inequality of access, experience and attainment) have derailed the boarder policy objective of higher education as a tool disrupt the vicious cycle of intergenerational social inequality (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). Boliver (2017) argues posit that , as things stand, higher education continues playing a major role in reproducing elite affluence. As Haveman and Wolfe did in 1995, the Social Mobility Commission Report (2016) caution that should the current higher education system not undergo bold and deliberate reform, it will not only halt efforts to advance social justice but will further exacerbate the spread of socio-economic inequality across future generations. This is particularly vital as global economies become increasingly knowledge based and professionalized, and a higher education qualification become a strong precondition for one's occupational and social advancement in society (World Bank, 2017).

The rising of the attainment ladder at the doors of the privileged class and less so at the doors of the working classes while higher education qualifications are made a prerequisite to occupational and social advance has made higher education a means not of eliminating race and class distinctions, but of deepening and solidifying them (Truman, 1947; Sutton Trust, 2013; Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Brown et al, 2013; Boliver, 2017).

The focus of my study is on high non-completion and low completion rates amongst working-class students who make it into higher education institutions. This is an important area because not only has poor attainment rate been identified as one of higher education's most pertinent challenges today, its implications for the broader higher education policy objectives (i.e. transformation and equitable participation) are dire for the future of higher education and society

(Thomas, 2002; Quinn, 2004, Reay, 2017; BBC, 2017; The Guardian, 2017; Long, 2018). In the next section I will define and clarify the key concepts of working-class non-completion and completion in higher education as they are understood in this study. This will be followed by a discussion of theories of working-class completion and working-class non-completion in higher education, and the gaps that this study seeks to contribute to.

2.4. Working-class completion and non-completion in higher education

2.4.1 Key Concepts

Defining Working Class Students

The lack of a universally accepted definition of the working-class presents challenges for educational researchers examining this group's educational experiences (Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Jakopovich, 2014). The Cambridge Dictionary defines working class as "a social group that consists of people who earn little, often being paid only for the hours or days that they work, and who usually do physical work". Here we can see that working-class students are generally defined according to their parents' social class attributes, i.e. parents' educational, occupational and income level. Essentially, working class students are children of a particular social group of parents (Jakopovich, 2014).

In *Miseducation* Diane Reay (2017, p. 77) stresses the importance of reflecting on the history of class in education in order to gain an appreciation of "historical processes whereby working-class educational failure has become legitimised and institutionalised". Reflecting on her personal journey and evolving understanding of being working class, Reay (2017, p. 28) discourages generalizing the working class and reminds us that there are "very many different ways of being working class":

"…while the commonly held view of the working classes both then and now is that they are ignorant, stupid and racist, there were myriad class distinctions within the working classes, as well as between the working and middle classes, even in the 1950s and 1960s….the working classes don't just include homeowners as well as council tenants, they encompass black and white, urban and rural, public as well as private sector workers, English-born alongside migrants…." (Reay, 2017, p. 27)

The literature on working -class students has mainly grouped them amongst the previously excluded 'non-traditional students' , they include: students from low income households, students from ethnic minority communities, indigenous people, first generation students, mature students, disabled students, female students, students from low participating regions, working class students, etc (Haveman and Smeeding, 2006; Pell Institute, 2008, Briggs and Hall, 2012; CFE , 2013). I find the classifying of working-class students as a subcategory of 'non-traditional students' to dilute the significance of class in education experiences, in that the term 'non-traditional students' often collapse too many categories of students into one . Unless clarified, this can send a false sense of homogeneity amongst a very diverse group of students. For example, unlike in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, in South African non-traditional students are of ethnic majority not monitory, and the designation of someone as "working class" goes beyond their parents' class attributes to whoever has guardianship of the student such as grandparents and uncles (DHET,2019).

The term commonly used in South Africa is "poor and working-class students" and it is designated to a category of the student population on the basis of their families' annual household income (DHET, 2011). Until December 2017, undergraduate students from households earning a combined annual income that is below R122 000 were considered poor and working class, as determined by the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Due to the higher education funding policy reforms that took place in December 2017, this figure was revised to R350 000 per annum, accounting for over 90% of South African households (Statistics South Africa, 2019). Given that participants in this study received their NSFAS funding before December 2017, the concept of working-class students in this study is employed to refer to students from South African households earning below a combined annual income of up to R122 000, whose undergraduate studies were funded by NSFAS at a public South African university.

Defining Non-completion/dropout and Completion in Higher Education

In higher education the concept of student non-completion commonly refers to a situation whereby a student leaves his or her studies without obtaining the minimum requirements for completion (Larsen et al, 2013). The term non-completion is also used interchangeably with terms such as dropout, early departure, withdrawal, and non-continuance (Jones, 2008; Yorke and Thomas, 2003; Bassi et al, 2015). In this study I use non-completion and dropout interchangeably.

Whilst a student can drop out of a field of study, department, faculty, university or the higher education system altogether, in this study I employ the concept of non-completion to refer to NSFAS funded undergraduate students who dropped out of the South African public higher education system altogether. I therefore exclude students who simply moved from one degree to another or one university to another. Completion will refer to NSFAS funded students who successfully attained their first undergraduate degree at a public South African university.

My study will deviate from the general conceptualisation of non-completion as a student's decision. The literature on student dropout has often focused on pre and during-university factors that *pull* students out of higher education (Johnes & McNabb, 2004; Quinn et al, 2005; Gale and Parker, 2013; Moore-Cherry and Burroughs, 2016). Less attention has gone into the kind of dropout that occurs when a student is *pushed* out of the university, despite his or her willingness to continue, on the basis of universities' meritocratic decisions, policies or judgements. In the former, there is often an implied sense of agency and choice in students' experiences of non-completion. For example, when a student decides to discontinue her studies in favour of an employment opportunity that has presented itself, this student has been *pulled* out of higher education. In this example, 'employment' can be seen as a pull factor behind the student 'decision' to pursue work over her studies. In their study of the dropout challenge in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Island, Jocey Quinn et al (2005, p.4) focussed exclusively on "working-class students who choose to leave before completion". Similarly, Liang and Robinson (2003, p. 175) shone the research spotlight on how "student's perceptions and expectations of that higher education environment may impact on their decision to withdraw". Similarly, Quinn (2004, p. 60) sought to "understand the meanings and implications of 'voluntary' drop-out amongst working-class students" in the UK". All these studies frame non-completion as a student's decision.

In contrast, others have drawn from Bourdieu's notion of habitus to suggest that the research spotlight also be placed on how the institutional habitus of different HEIs and the different learning environments contribute to working class non-completion (Nora, 2004; Thomas, 2002; Reay et al, 2010; Crozier & Reay, 2011). Mallman (2017) view working class dropout as a consequence of often overlooked institutional practices that facilitate the pushing of working-class students out of higher education. These institutional practices reinforce the notion of working-class students as inadequate, whilst reinforcing the sense of legitimacy and entitlement amongst those from the dominant classes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). My study wishes to contribute

towards this discussion by drawing our attention to universities policies, decisions and practices that force working class students out of the higher education system, despite the students' willingness to persist.

Given my experience as a former member of the Council for Readmissions Committee at one of the selective universities in South Africa, I am familiar with the rarely spoken about *pushed* form of non-completion whereby a faculty or university decide to expel a student on meritocratic or financial grounds despite his or her willingness to continue with her studies. Students who fail an often-unspecified number of modules at the end of the academic year are 'academically excluded', 'deregistered' and 'pushed' out of the university despite their willingness to continue. The decision to push the student out of the university is often taken by his or her faculty, sometimes but not always, with an opportunity to appeal. At some elite institutions (Matie Media ,2018) students are deregistered and forced out of their courses or university in the middle of the academic year. Another form of pushed non-completion occurs when a student loses his or her financial aid package due to poor academic performance and as a result denied registration at the beginning of the following academic year due to outstanding fees (Matie Media ,2018).

2.4.2 Different theoretical perspectives on student completion and non-completion in HE

Inequality of educational attainment has been examined from a variety of theoretical perspectives (Longden, 2004). In this section I critically review different theoretical perspectives on non-completion and completion in higher education. Although inequality of attainment is prevalent across the student population, I focus specifically on completion and non-completion amongst working class students in higher education.

Vincent Tinto's Theoretical Framework

The literature on patterns of educational attainment has been greatly influenced by the work of Professor Vincent Tinto whose student integration model (Tinto, 1975) has been widely accepted as instructive for decades. Tinto, an American sociologist, developed a longitudinal student

integration model to explain student departure from higher education (Longden, 2004; Larsen et al, 2013). Since his paper "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research" in 1975, Tinto's ideas have been a constant reference in research on student retention and non-completion in higher education (Larsen et al, 2013). With regard to non-completion, Tinto ascribes an individual student's lack of formal and informal interaction with a higher education institution (HEI) and the meanings he or she ascribes to this interaction, at the centre of the student's decision to drop out of the HEI. With regard to completion, Tinto attributes success to the individual student's ability to socially and academically assimilate into a HEI. His emphasis is on improving a student's portfolio of abilities in order to remedy his or her social and academic deficit and enable success (Longden, 2004).

Tinto adopts a longitudinal view to a student's higher education journey and outcomes (Tinto, 1975). His model draws our attention to three consecutive periods that are crucial in a student's higher education experiences and outcomes: 'separation', 'integration' and 'assimilation' (Tinto, 1975; Longden, 2004). First, Tinto considers a student's biographical characteristics upon entry into higher education (e.g. social origins, individual attributes and pre-university experiences) "to directly influence student departure decisions, as well as students' initial commitments to the institution and to the shared goal of persisting to graduation" (Longden, 2004, p. 6). He identifies this stage as the "separation period" in the individual student's higher education journey. Secondly, the student's pre-university characteristics, his or her commitment to the institution and the shared goal of persisting to graduation is said to determine the student's social and academic integration into the higher education, which will in turn, influence his or her odds of dropping out or persisting.

The final period in Tinto's model is the extent to which the student structurally assimilates into the HEI as a result of the match or mismatch between the student's individual characteristics mentioned above and the HEI's social and academic system. Overall, Tinto theory considers student completion and non- completion in higher education to be an outcome of, first, the extent to which a student manages to socially and academically integrate and assimilate into the academic and social logic of the HEIs. Secondly, Tinto's theory views student non-completion and completion as an outcome of an individual student's 'commitment' and 'decisions' (Longden, 2004, p6).

Despite its prominence, Tinto's theory of student completion and non-completion in higher education hasn't gone unchallenged (Berger, 2000). Berger (2000) has specifically critiqued Tinto's insufficient attention to the impact of social class inequality and institution's tendency to discriminate certain groups of students in their journeys and experiences of non-completion in higher education. Berger (2000) found that while it offers useful pragmatic pointers on how to improve student experiences and their odds of success in higher education, Tinto's model tends to confine students' experiences to their encounters within HEIs , without engaging enough with their pre-university socio-economic realities that tend to follow then into higher education. Tinto is also critiqued for prioritizing the assimilation of non-traditional students into untransformed institutional cultures and practices, without paying sufficient attention to the need for institutional change and transformation. This, Longden (2004) argues, renders Tinto's model potentially narrow and inadequate in explaining the complex and diversity of experiences that result in certain students succeeding and others dropping out of HEIs. Liang and colleagues (2003) found the fixed variables in Tinto's model to box students in a manner that overlooks their individual higher education experiences and the personal meanings they attach to these experiences.

Socio-Cultural Theories of Completion and Non-completion in HE

The socio-cultural perspective sees student failure and success in higher education as a function of dominant values and practices that inform who and what is valued and rewarded in HEIs. As such, socio-cultural theories take the transformation of higher education argument a step further, by suggesting that inequality of educational attainment be examined by looking beyond student characteristics and HEIs practices, and towards the role and reproduction of dominant cultural values and practices in society and how they shape educational transactions. Here the significance of raced, classed and gendered educational experiences shapes the lens through which disparities in educational access, experience and success is examined (Quinn, 2004; Quinn et al, 2005).

"By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the education system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture"

(Bourdieu, 1977, p. 494).

Pierre Bourdieu, a renowned French sociologist, draws our attention to the importance of social and cultural origins in understanding inequalities in educational experiences and outcomes (Longden, 2004). His reproduction theory suggests an alternative paradigm to studying, analysing and explaining persistent class inequalities in educational attainment by drawing our attention to the relationship between family background, educational experiences and outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1993). Bourdieu looks at inequality of educational experiences and outcomes through a broader analysis of power relations between social classes. He identifies the education system as a significant contributor to "the reproduction of the structure of power relationships and symbolic relationships between classes" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 487). His emphasis on the role of students' social and cultural background makes the reproduction theory particularly suitable when studying working class students' experiences and outcomes in higher education (Longden, 2004).

Social reproduction is understood as a process whereby disadvantages and inequalities are passed on from one generation to another for one section of society, whilst advantage and privilege are reproduced and passed on to another (Grenfell, 2012). The theory holds that, based on their level of education, occupational and social status, elite parents impart onto their children, amongst other privileges, cultural resources such as dominant societal values, language skills, knowledge, attitudes, skills, abilities and dispositions, whose effective transmission leads to successful educational experiences and outcomes (Reay, 2004). Bourdieu and Passeron (1993) therefore identify elite intergenerational parent-to-child transfer of family-based endowments and abilities as the primary means through which structured social inequalities are reproduced and perpetuated in educational experiences. Bourdieu named these family-acquired privileges and abilities capital.

Bourdieu's reproduction theory has gone on to inspire a number of scholars who have made significant contributions to our understanding of inequality of access, experiences and outcomes in higher education , making his theoretical framework particularly suitable for my study (Thomas, 2002; Naidoo, 2004; Quinn, 2004; Yosso, 2005 Mills, 2008; Tzanakis, 2011; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Crul et al, 2017).

Drawing from Bourdieu's notion cultural capital , Tzanakis (2011) point at the education system and educators themselves as the primary facilitators of unequal educational experiences and outcomes with how they recognise and reward students in possession of dominant elite cultural capital. Tzanakis (2001) observed how dominant elite cultural capital is institutionally legitimized and rewarded to unfairly confer distinction and privilege to children from the dominant cultural

and social origins by educational institutions at the expense of children from subordinate working-class families and communities. HEIs are said to achieve the reproduction of dominant culture by setting up "rigged academic standards" (Tzanakis, 2011, p. 76) that favour and reward elite cultural capital and shun those from subordinate social and cultural backgrounds. Under the myth of meritocracy, students from dominant elite social origins are endorsed as gifted, talented, knowledgeable by virtue of being in possession of dominant forms of cultural capital (Polikoff et al, 2019).

By rewarding those in possession of dominant cultural advantages and penalising those from subordinate cultural backgrounds, the HEIs, through their biased selection and assessment criteria, reproduce inequalities in access and success in higher education (Naidoo, 2004). Consequently, according to Naidoo (2004, p. 460), "the higher education system thus acts as a 'relay' in that it reproduces the principles of social class and other forms of domination under the cloak of academic neutrality". Drawing from Bourdieu (1994, p. 36) , Naidoo (2004, p.460) adds that the higher education system occupies the role of " a screen that permits the realisation of social classification in the guises that allow it to be accomplished invisibly" and thus "contribute to the 'misrecognition' and therefore 'naturalization' of structures of domination". It follows that, in a system that has naturalized elite reproduction and domination, poor attainment by children of the subordinate social class will seem natural.

Drawing from Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Liz Thomas (2002) called for inequality of experience and outcomes to be understood through the lens universities' institutional habitus. She makes the case that, beyond efforts to raise higher education awareness, improving pre-university activities and support for non-traditional students, HEIs ought to celebrate and not shun diversity of social and cultural practices that different students bring to the field of higher education. Thomas directly links student non-completion in HEIs to feeling of not fitting in and being undervalued:

*...if an institutional habitus is inclusive and accepting of difference, and does not prioritize or valorise one set of characteristics, but rather celebrates and prizes diversity and difference....students from diverse backgrounds will find greater acceptance of and respect for their own practices and knowledge, and this in turn will promote higher levels of persistence in HE… If a student feels that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw earlier (*Thomas 2002, p. 431)

Drawing from the findings of a research project that explored the meanings and implications of withdrawal from higher education amongst working class people in the UK, Quinn (2004, p.57) took socio-cultural argument a step further and theorized working class non-completion as a "self-fulfilling cultural narrative" as much as it is an outcome of working class communities' material circumstances. She acknowledges the usefulness of calls for more student support and institutional change as advanced by Thomas (2002) but argue that "this path can only lead us so far". Quinn suggest that we deviate from perspectives or approaches that pathologize working class students to an extent of making failure a part of working-class students' identity. Quinn (2004, p.63) sees working class non-completion as something bigger than its perceived remedies, something that "has a life of its own" … "a classed cultural narrative". She found that the growth of higher education aspirations and access amongst the working class is largely accompanied by expectations that failure will be more of a norm than an exception. She qualifies this argument:

Whilst this new world view helps to make university seem more accessible, it allows that university might be a flawed and unsatisfactory experience and that drop-out, rather than being unthinkable, is a possibility entertained from the outset. This is not to say that high hopes and idealistic visions do not exist or that they are never fulfilled. Indeed, working-class students can be the most motivated and successful of students, drawing on the sustaining networks of working-class family and friends … moreover, these universities provide them with many excellent educational opportunities. There is a danger of pathologising working-class students and stigmatising new universities in taking up these sensitive issues. However, if drop-out has become an engrained part of how working-class identity is portrayed and understood, it is crucial to understand this process. For some students being working-class is what keeps them in university, but personal networks and institutional support are not always enough to counteract structural inequality and cultural dynamics (Quinn, 2004, p. 65).

Bourdieu's reproduction theory been criticized and further developed for its reproductive emphasis and insufficient attention to the unlikely working-class graduates and their potential enablers of success in higher education, and thus his theoretical framework further developed (Yosso, 2005; Mills, 2008; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Jack, 2016; Crul et al, 2017; Arbouin, 2018). Against the backdrop of Bourdieuean theories of reproduction in higher education, some, like Carmen Mills (2008, p. 79), have theorized that "there is transformative potential in his theoretical constructs and that these suggest possibilities for schools and teachers to improve the educational outcomes of marginalised students". Barone (2006) contends that although Bourdieu's concept of

cultural capital provides a relevant account of inequality of attainment, it is far from exhaustive and can be further developed to account for the success of those in the margins. Theorizing working class students in higher education as inherently deficient presents potential pitfalls for the reproduction theorists (Arbouin, 2018).

Through her concept of "community cultural wealth" Yosso (2005, p. 70) challenges the popular deficit view of working class and ethnic minority students by offering a perspective on unequal educational experiences and outcomes that further develop Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and deviate from its common deficit interpretation. Yosso (2005) suggests that we look at marginalised communities as places of multiple strengths not lacks. She argues that there is a lot more in the portfolio of capitals and dispositions possessed by working-class students than many have cared to acknowledge or examine. She posit that, within socio-cultural perspectives of educational experiences and outcomes, not enough attention is paid to the transformative role and value of the working-class "community cultural wealth" that working-class students bring to higher education (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Drawing from the work of Oliver and Shapiro (1995), Yosso list familial, social, aspirational, navigational, resistant and linguistic capital amongst the pillars that constitute community cultural wealth prevalent amongst working class families and communities. She further draws from critical race theory, to argue that the community cultural wealth that working-class ethnic minority students bring into the classroom is crucial to their resilience and persistence in education.

Jill Crozier and Diane Reay (2011, p. 145) outline the concept of "capital accumulation" in a way that also highlight the transformative potential of Bourdieu's theoretical constructs. The two draw our attention to the significance of examining different learning environments and pedagogic processes operational at different HEIs, and how these hinder and enable working class completion in higher education. They too challenge the deficit view of working-class students in higher education by exploring how this group of students manage to access the means to succeed (capital accumulation) across and within different higher education contexts. Crozier and Reay (2011, p. 155) conclude by qualifying that "whilst capitals have relative value within and across the universities, the process to acquire these (whatever their value) is uneven and unequal between the different contexts".

Crul et al (2017, p. 321) draws our attention to concept of "the multiplier effect" to account for working class success in education in a manner that challenges and further build on Bourdieu's

reproduction theory. In their study of children of migrants , Crul and colleagues (2017) explain how resilience, strong social skills, exposure to coping with different environments at an early age, social support from parents and significant others, enables working class students to navigate the education system in a manner that multiplies their chances of success. Crul and colleagues add to a growing body of research work that seek solutions to poor educational attainment amongst the marginalised from the very group of people by exploring what could very well be this group's untapped potential.

My study joins this on-going conversation on inequality of educational attainment in higher education, with an objective to contribute towards an improved understanding working class experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education. Significant to my study is listening to working class graduates and dropouts to gain insights with academic and policy implications. I explore the strengths and limitations of Bourdieu's reproduction theory in aiding an improved understanding of working-class completion and non-completion in South African higher education. I specifically observe the role of capital, habitus and different university contexts on the varied educational journeys and outcomes of financial aid funded working class students at three different universities.

2. 4.3 Gaps in the literature

The prevalence of inequality of access, experience and attainment in higher education , and the strong policy commitment to transforming higher education experience and outcomes denote and invite ongoing efforts towards an improved understanding of dimensions of completion and non-completion amongst working class students (Gale and Parker, 2013; Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Boliver, 2017; Reay, 2017). My study heeds this call. This is important as higher education, through the prevalent classed, raced and gendered inequality of attainment, continues to reproduce instead of reducing social inequality (Boliver, 2017). Beyond the academic contribution, I hope that this study can contribute to efforts, within and outside the higher education community, to achieve social justice, equity and redress in higher education and society in general.

Secondly, Bourdieu's reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) has mainly look at inequality of educational attainment *between* social classes i.e. between working class students and their privileged middle- and upper-class counterparts. My study adds a layer into the socio-cultural

perspective of disparities in educational attainment, by examining completion and non-completion *within* the same social class i.e. financial aid funded working-class students. As Reay (2017, p. 28) reflected there are "very many different ways of being working class".

Inspired by the work of Amanda Arbouin (2018) on Black British Graduates and Reay et al (2009) on student identities and positioning in higher education, my study deviates from the use of middle- and upper-class students as a control group when studying working-class students' experiences of higher education. Arbouin's work black British graduates tells us that, although working class students may share similar social origin and schooling experiences, their higher education experience is far from homogeneous, and that there is value in understanding the diversity of their experiences.

My study challenges the mainly deficit lens through which working class experiences in higher education have been studied by looking at experiences of both working class dropouts and graduates and potential lessons from their respective educational experiences (Lin, 2014; Arbouin, 2018). Despite reported high rates working-class non-completion, there are pockets of unlikely successes, the unlikely working-class graduates, whose experiences and stories are just as important to understanding the bigger picture (Arbouin, 2018). I hope that looking into experiences of both working class graduates and dropouts should shed light on both the positive (enabling) and negative (disabling) dimensions of their higher education experiences (Crozier and Reay (2011).

Thirdly, different approaches have been adopted in an effort to reduce non-completion and improve completion amongst vulnerable groups in higher education. These range from national approaches, institutional approaches and faculty/departmental interventions (Crosling et al, 2008; ELLP, 2011). An example of a national approach includes the massive 2007/2008 investment by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for improving retention and success in English higher education (HEFCE, 2008). Institutional approaches to improving retention and completion have largely centered around the provision of extra support to vulnerable students and specific HEIs. For example, the provision of extra psycho-social support to first year students at HEIs with low retention and completion rates (ELLP, 2011). An international study by Crosling et al (2008), drawing from Tinto' student integration model, suggest *the development of a student-responsive curriculum*, *improving students' academic and social engagement* and *fostering active learning* as ideal institutional approaches to reducing dropout rates and improving completion rates. Yorke and Thomas (2003, p. 63) posit that improving retention and completion amongst low income

students require "a strong policy commitment to access and retention, backed by practical action"… and a "deep commitment running through the institution, which seeks to maximise the success of its students" (Yorke and Thomas, 2003, p. 72). Yorke and Thomas (2003, p.72) proceed to recommend the following factors in improving the success of low income students:

- *an institutional climate supportive in various ways of students' development, that is, perceived as 'friendly';*
- *an emphasis on support leading up to, and during, the critically important first year of study;*
- *an emphasis on formative assessment in the early phase of programmes;*
- *a recognition of the importance of the social dimension in learning activities; and*
- *recognition that the pattern of students' engagement in higher education was changing, and a preparedness to respond positively to this in various ways* (Yorker and Thomas, 2003, p.72).

The recommended approaches to reducing non-completion and improving completion by Yorke and Thomas (2003) and Crosling et al (2008) contain a noticeably gap or limitation: fixation with what working class students lack and how to help them fit or assimilate into HEIs, with little regard for what this group of students bring and offer to higher education. An inherent weakness in these approaches is the predisposition to look for solutions to high non-completion and low completion rates amongst working-class students from everywhere else but the students themselves and what they offer. In contrast, work by Yosso (2005, p.) on the transformative potential of ethnic minority students' "community cultural wealth", Mills (2008, p. 79) on the "transformative potential of Bourdieu's theoretical constructs", Crozier and Reay (2011, p. 145) on "capital accumulation", Lin (2014, p. 366) on students' "realigning capital portfolios", and Crul et al (2017, p. 321) on the "multiplier effect" suggest working class students are not empty handed upon arrival in higher education. The work of these scholars suggest that more effort be made to understand the portfolio of capitals and dispositions that working class students bring to higher education, the strategies they employ to realign their portfolio of capitals and accumulate additional valued resources in HEIs in a manner that multiplies their chances of success.

Inspired by the work of theses scholars (Yosso, 2005; Mills, 2008; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Lin, 2014; Crul et al, 2017) , my study seeks to contribute towards an improved understanding of working-class students' journeys to and through higher education, by exploring the role of the 'currency' of their portfolio of capitals and dispositions (habitus) in their experiences of completion and non-completion at different universities. To explore how different universities, enable or constrain their ability to accumulate and/or convert their portfolio of capital and

dispositions in a manner that enables to successfully 'trade' in higher education. Crozier and Reay (2011, p. 155) confirm that working class students do "acquire sufficient capitals within the context of their university to learn and achieve successfully, although success is relative".

Bourdieu theorizes that working class students are less likely to feel at home in higher education institutions when compared to their privileged counterparts , as middle and upper class children are brought up under conditions with countless resourceful support systems that shape their outlooks, beliefs, dispositions and practices (habituses) in ways that empowers them to pursue careers and succeed (Maton, 2012). Those raised in elite social backgrounds are said to consider accessing university education a natural or obvious step for them and upon enrolment they are more likely to feel like a "fish in water" when compared to their underprivileged counterparts (fish out of water) (Reay, 2004; Maton, 2012). Narrative accounts of working-class graduates and dropouts may contradict this logic. Coming from a underprivileged background may have the opposite effect to what Bourdieu's assumptions. The significance of research that addresses this gap in Bourdieusian thinking is highlighted by Crozier and Reay (2011) who captured how working-class students restructured and realigned habituses generated resilience, courage and determination that led to the positive educational outcomes at different types of universities in England. They do, however, stress that "whilst capitals have relative value within and across the universities, the process to acquire these (whatever their value) is uneven and unequal between the different contexts" (Crozier and Reay, 2011, p. 155). My study's attempt to understanding the role of different learning contexts in working class experiences of completion and non-completion offers an opportunity to further develop Bourdieu's reproduction theory, specifically his notion of habitus.

2. 4. Context: South African Higher Education

2.4.1 Social stratification in South Africa: a lasting legacy of colonialism and apartheid

The South African higher education experience is inextricably linked to the country's history of colonialism and apartheid (Presidency, 1994; Statistics South Africa, 2017). A history of white minority domination and subjugation of the black and mainly working-class majority. Due to this apartheid and colonial past, South Africa remains sharply segregated along class, gender, racial and spatial lines. Importantly, class and racial domination continue to resemble two sides of the same coin as the poor and working classes remain almost exclusively black, while the middle- and upper-

class elite remain white. The legacy of this segregated and exploitative past continues to reproduce one of the most unequal societies in the world today (National Planning Commission, 2011; Statistics South Africa, 2017; South African Human Rights Commission, 2019).

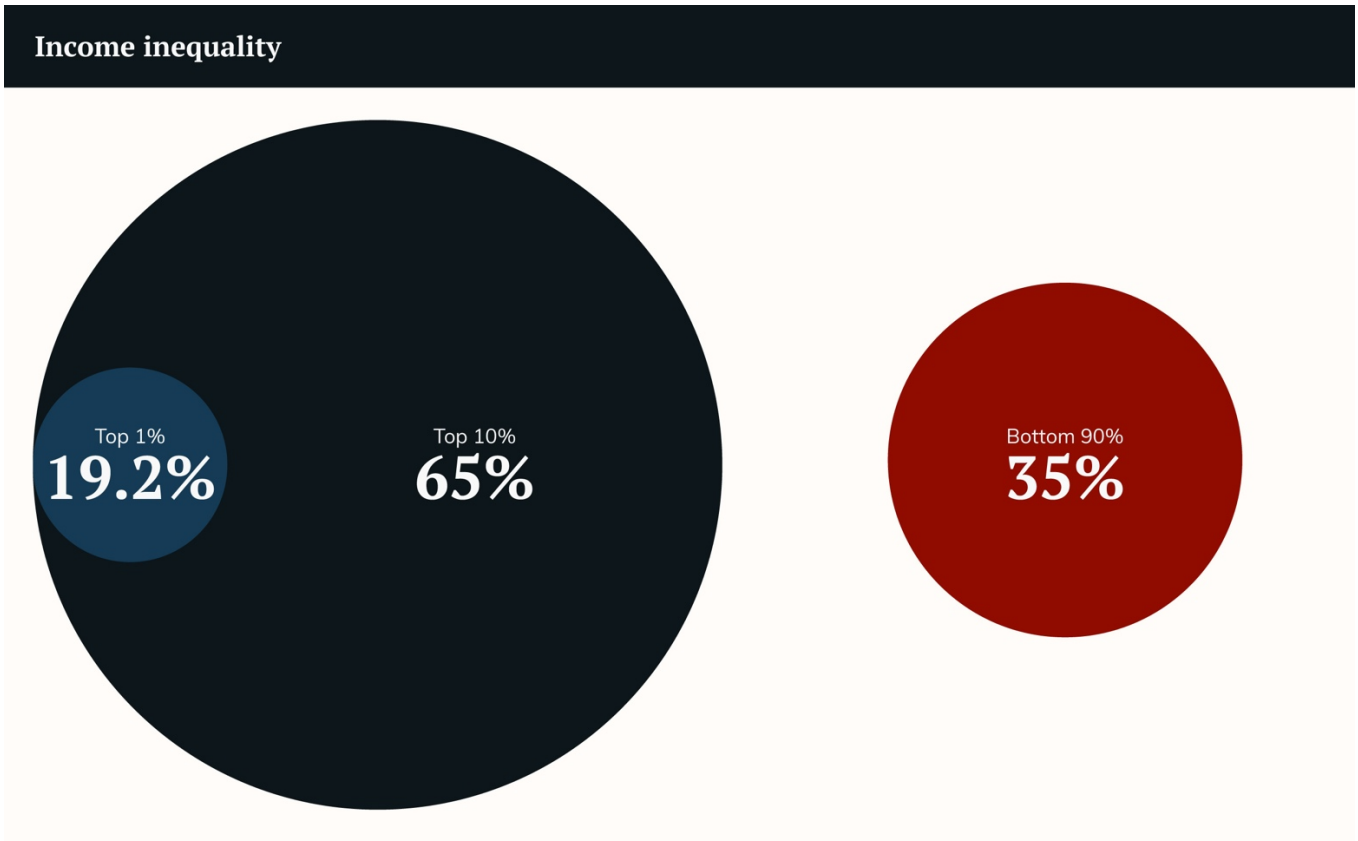
After 300 years of colonialism and 45 years of apartheid, a policy of legally enforced racial segregation and exploitation, South Africa's 1994 democratic dispensation inherited a fundamentally hierarchical nation resembling two societies in one (National Planning Commission, 2011; Abel 2015). On the one hand, is a society of the dominant white minority elite who ruled the country under a colonial and apartheid order pillared by the social, economic, spatial and political exploitation and domination of the African majority. On other hand, are marginalised Africans, systematically dispossessed and exploited through repressive labour laws and largely reduced to the indignity of secondary citizens. This legacy reproduced the abject poverty and degradation for the working-class black majority, who continue to exist side by side with obscene opulence of the white minority (De Wet, 2008).

Colonial and apartheid's spatial laws concentrated the black working-class majority in peripheral rural homelands from which they can be temporarily drawn into cities and small towns in the form of cheap labour (De Wet, 2008; Abel, 2015). These rural communities were and remain grossly underdeveloped and overwhelmingly dependent on social welfare and subsistence farming. Alongside opulent cities and towns reside black migrant workers in overcrowded and under resourced informal settlements known as townships. They are a legacy of enforced segregation and resultant inequality of access to education, health, welfare, transport and employment opportunities that not only reinforce socio-economic disparities between classes but also maintains an inefficient economy unable to carry the rest of society in post-apartheid South Africa (Abel, 2015). Statistics South Africa's 2017 *Poverty Trends in South Africa* report revealed that, over two decades since the end of apartheid, the face of persistent poverty and social immobility in South Africa remains largely youth, black, female and of rural and township origin with little to no formal education.

The extent of socio-economic disparities in post-apartheid South Africa is particularly illuminated by how race, class, and gender intersect in patterns of educational attainment, unemployment and the country's ever widening levels of *income, wealth* and *spatial* inequalities. First, Statistics South Africa's 2019 *Inequality Trends* Report revealed that income inequality has deepened, with the top 10% earners taking home 65% of the income and the bottom 90% earners taking home the

remaining 35% of the total income. The *Inequality Trends Report* further revealed the racial, gender and spatial nature of the income inequality. White South Africans are not only more formally educated, they are also more likely to find employment and earn three times their black counterparts. Between 2011 and 2015, the income of bottom 50% of earners has plunged, while the income of the 1% grew by 48% (Statistics South Africa, 2019).

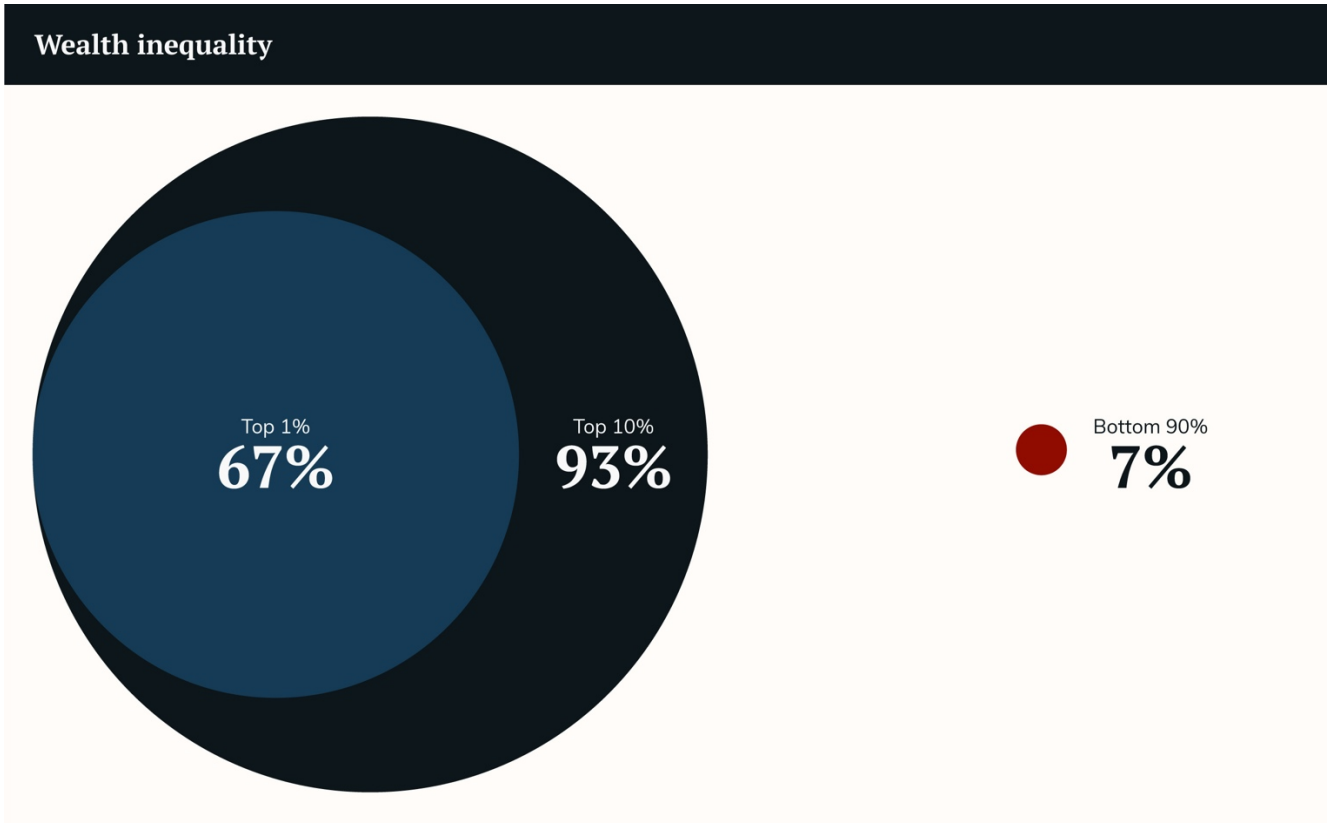
Figure 1: Income Inequality in South Africa



(Source: Statistics South Africa, 2019; Infographic by Ryan Honey)

Secondly, beyond income inequality, the *Inequality Trends Report* also highlight how wealthy South Africans have gotten wealthier and the poor poorer. This finding is consistent with the work of Anna Orthofer's (2016) , whose study on wealth distribution in South Africa approximated 67% of the country's wealth to be in the hands of the top 1 %, 93% in the hands of the top 10% and only 7% of the country's wealth circulating in the bottom 90% of the population.

Figure 2: Wealth Inequality in South Africa

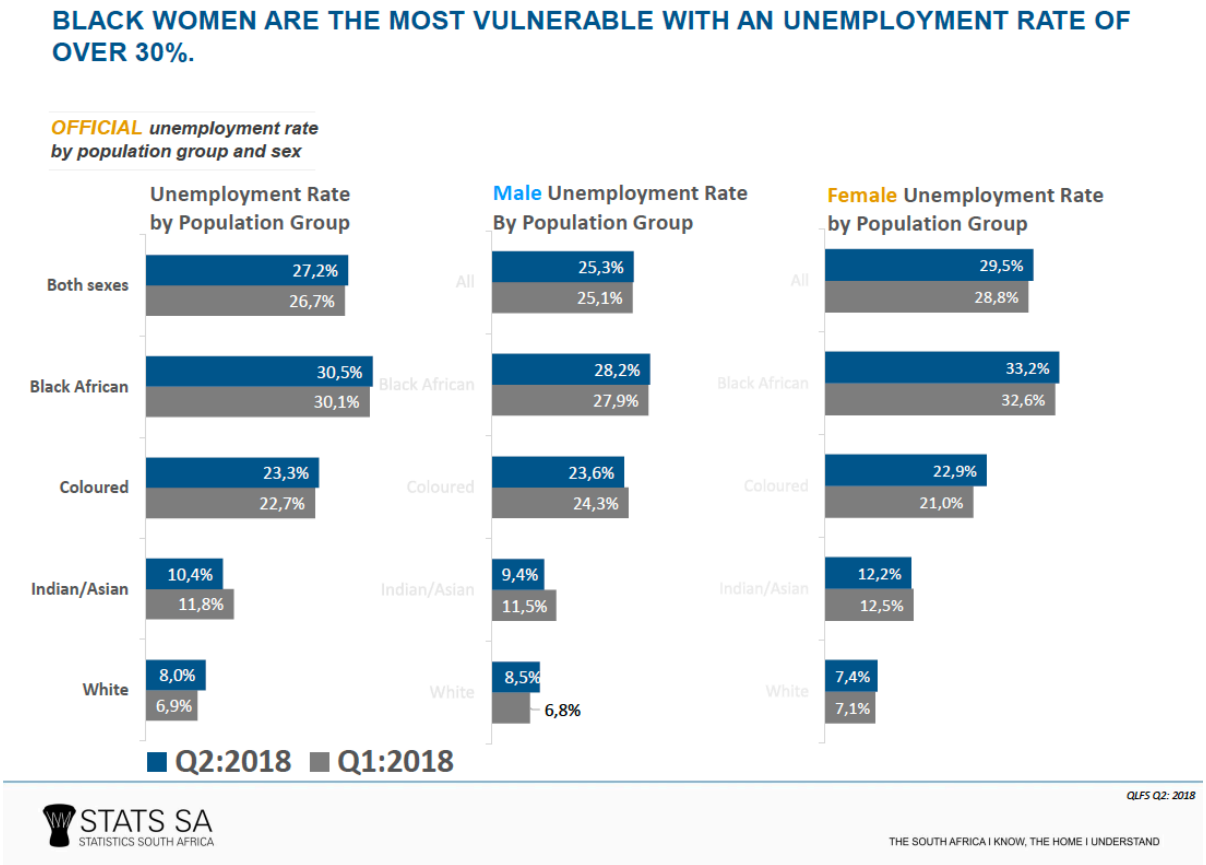


(Source: Statistics South Africa, 2019; Infographic by Ryan Honey)

Thirdly, during the first quarter of 2018, Statistics South Africa, using an essentially conservative definition of unemployment, revealed that unemployment in South Africa stood at a conservative yet stable 27.2% or 6.1 Million people. The expanded unemployment rate is at a staggering 37.2% or 9.6 Million people (Statistics South Africa, 2018). The picture is particularly bleak for the youth, an overwhelming majority of whom have no higher education experience. About two-thirds of all unemployed are below the age of 35. In 2018, approximately 7.9 Million (39.3%) of young people aged between 15-34 years were not in employment, education or training (NEET) (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

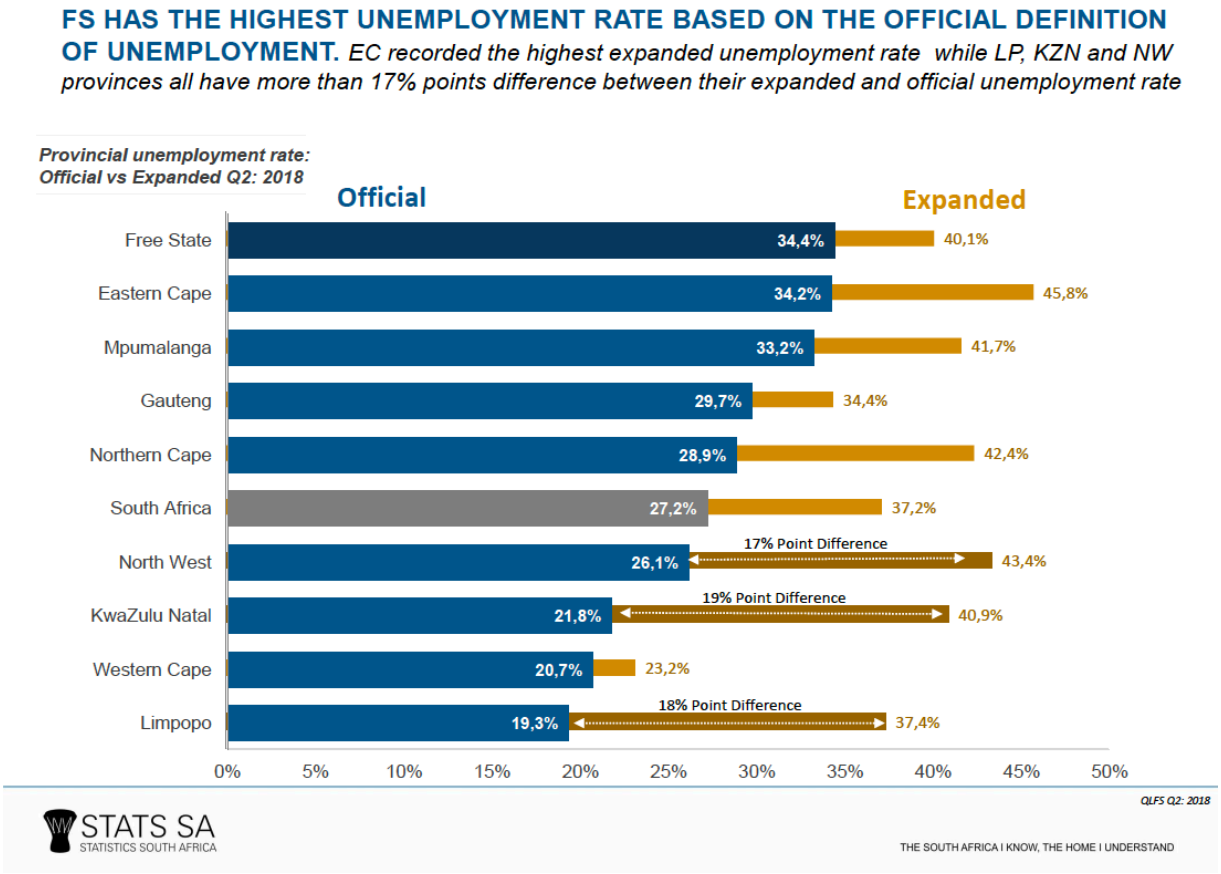
The figure below shows the intersection between gender, race and unemployment, clearly identifying black women as the most vulnerable social group.

Figure 3: Unemployment rate by race and gender group



(Source: Statistics South Africa, 2018)

The unemployment rate is also still reflective of the enduring colonial and apartheid spatial inequalities. Research by the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (2016) stressed how black working-class families continued residence in peripheral and underdeveloped rural areas undermines their access to economic opportunities (Webster, 2019). The figure below illustrates the geographic face of unemployment, with predominately rural provinces such as the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and North West province experiencing the highest unemployment rate under the expanded definition:



2.4.2 Universities under colonialism and apartheid: a brief contextual history

The context of my study is South Africa, a country whose higher education system cannot be fully understood without delving into its history of colonialism (1652-1948) and apartheid (1948-1994) and the enduring influence these historical events on the country's field of higher education today (Badat, 1995). It is a history of dominance by the white settler minorities and the subordination of the black majority in South Africa (Martins, 2015). Pre-1994, the country's colonial era gave birth to three categories of universities: *historically-White English-medium universities*, *historically-White Afrikaans-medium universities* and *historically-Black universities* (Badat, 1995). The historically-White English-medium universities were set up by and to serve the British settler community, the historically-White Afrikaans-medium universities were set up by and to serve the Afrikaner community and historically-Black universities were set up specifically for black students and to separate them from white students (Murray, 1982). Thus, from as early as 1910, when the Union of South Africa was formed, the South African field of higher education was set up to perpetuate racial and class segregation (Naidoo, 2004).

Both Afrikaner and English-medium universities adopted ethos, policies and practices that discriminated against the admission of black students on the basis of their race (Badat, 1995). Although English-medium universities such as Wits University and the University of Cape Town, under the hoax of academic neutrality, projected a liberal and inclusive outlook, racial discrimination in student selection persisted behind their ivory towers (Murray, 1982). For example, despite embracing the notion of 'open universities' on paper during apartheid , Wits University still petitioned the South African government to pass legislation that would allow the institution to exclude black students on the basis of their race. For the few black students who were admitted at the English -medium universities, their higher education experience was undermined through various forms of racial discrimination (Murray, 1982). Murray (1982) further narrate how non-white students admitted at the University of Cape Town and Wits University were prohibited from living in university residences and participating in sporting activities in order to prevent social integration.

On the other hand, White Afrikaans-medium universities were propelled by a wave of Afrikaner nationalism that sought to challenge the political and cultural dominance of the British Community in South Africa. It is this wave of Afrikaner nationalism that brought about a policy of Apartheid when the Afrikaner National Party was propelled into power in 1948. According to Price (1991:23) at this stage the policy of apartheid aimed to: 1) create a racially segregated society which would preserve Afrikaner identity 2) secure White political and economic supremacy and 3) move the Afrikaner community into a position of social and economic parity with the English speaking community which had long dominated the economy. Through the Extension of University Education Act (Act 45 of 1959) , these objectives also informed the reorganisation of universities during the apartheid period into four racial categories : 'White', 'Coloured' (Malay and mixed race population group), 'Indian' and 'African'. For example, the University College of Belville, today known as University of Western Cape, was created for Coloured students, the University of Durban-Westville was created for Indian students and the University College of the North for Black students. Afrikaans-medium universities , such as Pretoria University, and the English -medium universities, such as University of Cape Town, were all collapsed under one category 'White Universities' (Price, 1991). Apartheid era's Extension of University Education Act (Act 45 of 1959), therefore, served to further entrench the racial segmentation of universities that originated under British colonial rule.

2.4.3 Universities in Post-Apartheid South Africa: a three tiered system

South Africa's post-apartheid higher education policy can be traced back to the African National Congress's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the ruling party's blueprint socio-economic policy and development framework for a post-apartheid South Africa published in 1994. The transformation of the higher education system was identified as a major pillar of post-colonial and post-apartheid the reconstruction and development programme in efforts to break the cycle of poverty and to tackle the socio-economic legacy of colonialism and apartheid that has polarized South Africa into one of the most unequal nations in the world (DOE, 1997; DHET, 2019; Times, 2019). Additionally, the RDP policy document instructed the new democratic government to establish a higher education commission to investigate and report on the role of the higher education in national reconstruction and development (RDP, 1994).It is the recommendations of the 1995 National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) that resulted in and informed the first post-apartheid White Paper on Higher Education in April 1997 titled *"A Programme for Higher Education Transformation"* (DOE, 1997). The 1997 White Paper on higher education states that the higher education system must be transformed to redress past inequalities, to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities. As such, the white paper on higher education captured the historic and supreme task bestowed on post-apartheid higher education: *transformation and redress.*

When South Africans ushered in a post-apartheid democratic dispensation in 1994, universities were once again reorganized, this time in an attempt to break from the segmentation and social stratification that characterized colonial and apartheid era higher education (DOE, 1997; Hall 2015). A striking feature of this post-apartheid reorganization, and of particular relevance to my study, was the merging of historically white universities with black universities (Hall, 2015). For example, in 2005 Rand Afrikaans University, a former Afrikaans-medium university, merged with township-based campuses of Vista University, a former black university, to form the University of Johannesburg. The development of mergers gave rise to a three-tiered higher education landscape today: Historically White Universities, Historically Back Universities and Mergers . Despite the democratic government's policy commitment to achieve equity between and within South African Universities, the sector remains deeply stratified (Hall, 2015; Karodia et al, 2015). Former Whites only universities have maintained their status as desired ivory towers, while black universities maintain their subordinate status. The ivory towers are located in cities and towns close to opportunities, while Black universities remain in underdeveloped rural areas. Due to their

historical status, they are not only disproportionately resourced, their status enables their graduates to enjoy preference in the labour market (Karodia et al, 2015).

Another striking feature of post-apartheid higher education is that, despite the racial diversity that has been achieved in student demographics, it has not resulted in a more equal sector (Statistics South Africa, 2017). Beneath the racial diversity are stark class inequalities. For example, For example, over two-thirds of students Ivory Tower University, a highly selective former whites only university, are black . However, in 2016, only 21% of the student population at Ivory Tower University came from the bottom 90% of South African households, amongst whom only 5% of the country's wealth reside (National Treasury, 2017). In other words, despite being predominantly black ,75% of the student population at Ivory Tower University is made up of children of the top 10% of South African households, amongst whom 95% of the country's wealth reside (Statistics South Africa, 2017).

Despite a significant and commendable contribution made by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) towards making higher education increasingly accessible, poor and working class students remain significantly underrepresented across the sector. Nationally , of the 775 489 undergraduate students enrolled South African universities in 2016 , only 24% were NSFAS funded working class students. Consistent with apartheid era disparities, NSFAS funded working-class students are predominately enrolled in lower-status under resourced former black universities and grossly underrepresented in historically white and elite universities (NSFAS, 2018). Therefore, while post-apartheid higher education policies have transformed the racial composition of the university student population, it has also contributed to the reproduction and reinforcement of apartheid era class disparities (Kapp and Bangeni, 2017).

Using the latest available data from NSFAS (2018), the table below compares and visualize the representation of NSFAS funded working-class students in two historically white universities, two historically black universities and two merger universities. This group of students remain a minority in historically white universities and a majority in historically black universities:

Table 1: Representation of NSFAS funded working class students across the three tiers of universities in 2018

Name of Institution	Tier /Category	Number of Undergraduate Students	% of NSFAS funded undergraduate students
Wits University	Historically White University	21 661	21%
University of Cape Town	Historically White University	15 969	23%
University of Zululand	Historically Black University	14771	79%
University of Venda	Historically Black University	11 970	64%
University of Johannesburg	Merger University	42 415	23%
Nelson Mandela University	Merger University	22 079	28%

(Source: National Students Financial Aid Scheme, 2018)

Similar class disparities are evident in patterns of completion across the three tiers of universities. NSFAS funded working class students constituted a minority (26%) of the 203 096 students who graduated at the end of the 2016 academic year (NSFAS, 2018). While they constitute over two thirds of graduates at historically black universities such as University of Zululand and University of Venda, NSFAS funded graduates are grossly underrepresented in both former white universities and merger universities. Drawing from data published by NSFAS in 2018, the table below illustrates how NSFAS graduates are unequally represented across the different tiers of universities of NSFAS:

Table 2: Representation of NSFAS graduates across the three tiers of universities

Name of Institution	Tier /Category	% of NSFAS funded graduates
Wits University	Historically White University	15.7%
University of Cape Town	Historically White University	11.5%
University of Zululand	Historically Black University	70.8%
University of Venda	Historically Black University	63.9%
University of Johannesburg	Merger University	24.7%

Nelson Mandela University	Merger University	25.2%

(Source: NSFAS, 2018)

Beyond the enduring legacy of a race and class inequalities patterns of access and success post-apartheid higher education sector, and of specific importance to my study, the South African government has identified high non-completion and low completion rates amongst working class students as a direct threat to the redress and transformative role bestowed on post-apartheid higher education (National Development Plan, 2011; DHET, 2019). While completion rates are low across the student population, my study focuses on the high non-completion rates amongst students funded National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), a national student loan and grant scheme established in order to provide poor and working-class students with access to higher education (DHET, 2010). The 2011 report of the Department of Higher Education and Training's Ministerial Committee on the review of the National Students Financial Aid Scheme revealed that 67% of the 656 000 students funded through the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) between the year 2000 and 2010 were no longer in higher education. Of this 67%, 72% dropped out without completing their studies and only 28% graduated (DHET, 2010). The size of the dropout rate, the transformative role bestowed on post-apartheid higher education, and the social inequalities that continue to polarize post-apartheid South African society justify a study that seeks to contribute towards an improved understanding of working class experiences of completion and non-completion in South African higher education (Council on Higher Education, 2017).

The 2011 report of the Department of Higher Education and Training's Ministerial Committee on the review of the National Students Financial Aid Scheme decried the limited amount of research work that into examining the high non-completion and low completion rates in South African universities. Since then, a significant amount research work on student access, persistence and retention in South African higher education has been steadily coming through (Kapp et al, 2017; Le Roux, 2017; Sacks and Kapp, 2017; Bangeni and Pym 2017; Bangeni, 2017; Kelly-Laubscher et al, 2018; Walker, 2018). A common trend across this literature is that researchers are mainly looking at inequality of educational experiences through Amartya Sen's capability theoretical approach.

In their recent study on Factors Affecting the Success of First-Generation Students at a South African University, Kelly-Laubscher and colleagues (2018) observed how patterns of access, retention and success in South African higher education continue to reflect the country's patterns of class and racial inequality. Drawing from data provided by the Council on Higher Education, Kelly-Laubscher et al (2018, p.98) reported that:

"even for those participating in higher education, the throughput of African and coloured students is lower than their white counterparts, with only 20 and 24 per cent of African and coloured students, respectively, graduating within the regulation time for their diplomas/degrees, compared to 44 per cent of white students… it is clear from these statistics that increased participation by these groups has not resulted in a corresponding increase in graduation rates and throughput.

For black working-class students, who are the ethnic majority in South Africa, their higher education experience has been case of a revolving door of exclusion and unfulfilled higher education promises (Kelly-Laubscher et al, 2018). The accessibility of NSFAS financial assistance is further undermined by the information and technology gap between rural students and their urban counterparts. In other words, the degree of access, persistence and completion remains unequal on the basis of race, class and geographic origins. This view is echoed by Sacks and Kapp (2017), in their study of a life story of a first-generation female working class student who withdrew from an elite South African University because she felt she was 'going nowhere slowly'.

Moreover, the challenge of high non-completion and low completion rates amongst NSFAS funded working class students has begun to gain significant attention from South African higher education policy makers (DHET, 2019). A recently published cohort study conducted by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) on first time entering undergraduate students at public higher education institutions between 2000 to 2016, made the following observations that go on to affirm the relevance and significance of my study in the on-going efforts to transform South African higher education:

> *Transformation imperatives in the system are also challenged by the differential success according to population groups, with African and Coloured students fairing very poorly when compared to their Indian and White counterparts. While all students need to improve their throughput rates in minimum time, support for African and Coloured students to improve their performance is a critical equity issue.*

In addition, another issue highlighted in these cohort studies is the differential performance by gender, with female students outperforming male students in all undergraduate cohort studies. Further research needs to be undertaken to understand why male students are not performing as well as female students.

All institutions need to invest in data analytics to better understand their student dropout and throughput rates by population group and gender. They need to identify productive interventions to improve the efficiency of the higher education system. As a country we cannot afford to waste the human potential, nor to invest so much in our youth with such low chances of graduating successfully.

While it can be seen that there has been improvement in most instances in the dropout and throughput rates, a lot more needs to be done to ensure equal opportunities for success regardless of race, class, gender, language, disability and cultural background.

(Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019)

2.5 Conclusion

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This chapter located working-class completion and non-completion within the context of persistent inequality of access, experience and attainment in higher education. Evidence from the literature support the notion that, despite the sector's growth from elite to mass systems of higher education and strong policy commitments to transform and widen participation to children from previously marginalized communities, working-class journeys to and through higher education remain "far from fair" (Boliver, 2013, p.1). This reality continues to undermine the generally anticipated impact of higher education expansion in reducing social class disparities in society.

Different theoretical perspectives on student non-completion and completion in higher education, in particular Vincent Tinto's student integration model and Pierre Bourdieu's reproduction theory, were considered and critically examined. Notably, disproportionate research attention has gone into efforts to understand why and how working-class students fail to succeed in higher education, and less so on how they overcome, persist and succeed. My study attempts to move the research spotlight from student deficit to institutional critique and recognition of working-class resourcefulness in higher education. Moreover, I attempt to move away from an understanding of dropout as a student's decision and draw our attention to a *pushed* form of dropout and how this manifest at different higher education institutions.

This study heeds the call by the South African government (DHET) for ongoing efforts to contribute towards an improved understanding of students' experiences of completion and non-completion, especially working-class students funded by the National Students Financial Aid Scheme. The next chapter outline and justify my choice of Bourdieu's theoretical framework. The South African context is considered to present an interesting challenge to Bourdieu, it takes his reproduction theory out of its usual Eurocentric application into a higher education system is currently characterized by mixed bag of failures and success stories.

Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework: Pierre Bourdieu's Reproduction Theory

"By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give."

P. Bourdieu

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I outline and justify my preferred theoretical framework: Bourdieu's reproduction theory. I begin by presenting Bourdieu's reproduction theory and its primary propositions. I then draw attention to the key concepts underpinning Bourdieu's theory, with a specific focus on the concepts *field, habitus and capital* as understood in its cultural, economic, social and symbolic form. In addition to the empirical gaps identified in Chapter 2, I isolate and present my study's areas of potential theoretical contribution. The segregated nature of South African higher education, with its mixed bag of reproductive and transformative outcomes, is projected as an interesting challenge to Bourdieu's reproduction theory as it presents a context outside of Bourdieu's usual Eurocentric application.

Why Bourdieu?

Firstly, the strength of Bourdieu's theoretical framework lies in its widespread applicability and adaptability. Over the past decades, Bourdieu's theoretical approach to social sciences has been applied to wide range of fields of study including art, law, theology, history, politics , economics and importantly sociology of education (Grenfell, 2012). Drawing insights from a South African case study, Naidoo (2004, p. 457) found Bourdieu's reproduction theory to transcend "simplistic conceptions of universities as closed systems detached from the socio-political complex or as mere reflections of external power relations". Secondly, in light of persistent class inequalities in patterns of access, experiences and attainment in higher education, (Boliver, 2017; Arbouin, 2018), Bourdieu's reproduction theory offers powerful analytical lens for those of us in pursuit of transformation, redress and social justice in higher education and society in general. Bourdieu's theoretical lens illuminate avenues through which class domination and subordination is reproduced in educational experiences and outcomes under the popular myth of meritocracy (Naidoo, 2004; Arbouin, 2018; Polikoff et al, 2019). In other words, Bourdieu's work presents powerful analytical tools for social justice and redress advocacy work. Thirdly, despite the

reproduction emphasis in Bourdieu's theory, Yosso (2005) Carmen Mills (2008, p. 79) and others have shown that "there is transformative potential in his theoretical constructs and that these suggest possibilities for schools and teachers to improve the educational outcomes of marginalised students". South Africa, with its glaring class and racial inequalities, and a strong policy-level commitment to transformation and redress in higher education presents a particularly interesting context for Bourdieu (NDP, 2011). Overall, I advance that, despite notable gaps, Bourdieu's theoretical framework offers a unique and helpful approach for understanding inequality of educational attainment in South Africa and specifically, disparities within working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at different higher education institutions.

3.2 Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction

A theoretical framework provides the lens through which a study is carried out (Whetten, 1989). Whetten (1989) stresses that for a study to demonstrate a value-added contribution to theory development, such a study's contribution ought to alter the theory's generally accepted core propositions, relationship or assumptions. Primarily, my study explores the strengths and limitations of Bourdieu's reproduction theory in aiding an improved understanding of working-class completion and non-completion at different South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Pierre Bourdieu is regarded by many as one of the most prominent sociologists of all time and his theory of social reproduction remains one of the most widely acknowledged and applied work of all times. His work has had considerable influence across fields and subfields of inquiry, particularly in the sociology of education (Naidoo, 2004; Reay, 2004; Wacquant, 2007; Mills, 2008; Loveday, 2015). The translation of some of his major works in the late 1970s has resulted in its widespread popularity and application worldwide. Of particular interest to this my study is the growth and widespread application of Bourdieu's work on working-class students' experiences in higher education. Bourdieu's work in *The inheritors (1979), Homo Academicus (*1988), *Reproduction in Education, Culture and Society* (1977), An *Invitation to reflexive sociology* (1992) and more recently *Forms of Capital* (2001), have increasingly become citation classics and some of Bourdieu's most prevalent conceptual exports among sociologists of education and beyond (Wacquant, 2007). I now turn to Bourdieu's primary propositions.

Following the massification of the higher education, theories of educational meritocracy suggested that merit-based access and success would narrow the social class disparities in educational attainment (Treiman, 1970; Li, 2018). The meritocratic position is that the massive expansion and diversification of higher education systems will enable access and success on the basis of individual student' ability and not his or her social origins (Li, 2018). Sociologists such as Shavit and Blossfeld (1993), Goldthorpe (2003) and more recently Boliver (2017) and Polikoff et al (2019) have not only remained sceptical about this idea, but have presented evidence to the contrary. Bourdieu's reproduction theory presents an alternative to theories of educational meritocracy (Li, 2018), in studying, analyzing and explaining persistent social disparities in educational attainment, by drawing our attention to the relationship between students' social origins and their educational experiences and outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron,1977).

Social reproduction is generally understood as a process whereby social inequity is passed on from one generation to another, with the domination of the elite and the subordination of the working classes reproduced and maintained over time (Grenfell, 2012). Secondly, it is suggested that due to their level of education, occupation and social status, elite parents impart onto their children, amongst other privileges, economic, social and cultural resources such as dominant societal values, language skills, knowledge, attitudes, abilities and dispositions, whose effective transmission position them for privileged educational experiences and social destinations that mirror their privileged and dominant social origins. Bourdieu (1986) therefore identify elite intergenerational parent-to-child transfer cultural advantages (cultural reproduction) as the primary means through which structured social inequalities are reproduced and perpetuated in the education system and society in general (social reproduction).

Contrary to the theory of educational meritocracy, reproduction theory posit that the educational success of middle and upper-class children rests on the complimentary relationship between the wealth of elite cultural endowments (in all their manifestations) they acquire from home at an early age and education systems' rigged and biased judgements than shun children from marginalized social classes who lack idealized and hype dominant cultural capital attributes (Naidoo, 2004; Moore 2012). This way fairness is actively prevented as the working classes are disregarded and penalized for not possessing the same capitals and dispositions as the upper class (Polikoff et al ,2019). The manner and extent to which disguised 'meritocratic' practices are influencing working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education is of paramount importance to this study.

By legitimating, institutionalising and rewarding elite cultural attributes, the education system and educators themselves are seen as the primary facilitators or agents of social reproduction (Tzanakis, 2011). The education system is said to achieve this by setting up "rigged academic standards" that favour and reward those in possession of elite cultural capital and shun those from subordinate social and cultural backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Tzanakis, 2011, p76). In schools, students from elite social origins are endorsed as gifted, talented, knowledgeable, while the working classes are shunned as inadequate and incompetent. Such educational practices and judgements are legitimized and presented as fair and meritocratic, however, in reality they serve to reward those possessing idealised forms of cultural capital. In a world where educational credentials significantly influence one's ultimate social class position, it follows that, by rewarding those in possession of dominant cultural advantages and penalising those from subordinate cultural backgrounds, the education system, through its biased selection and assessment criteria, assumes the role of a primary facilitator of the reproduction, perpetuation and deepening of social inequality and marginalization (Reay, 2017).

Bourdieu's reproduction theory is pillared primarily by his key concepts of field, capital and habitus (Grenfell, 2012). Each of these key constructs will be explained below. Before delving into these key constructs, Sallaz and Zavisca (2007) caution that despite the growth and widespread interest in Bourdieu's theory theoretical constructs, most of their application constitute a limited and superficial grasp of depth and analytic significance of these key constructs. The mistake made by many is to treat each of these concepts independently (Sallaz and Zavisca, 2007).

Bourdieu's key constructs are necessarily interrelated both conceptually and empirically and must be treated as such and not in isolation. Grenfell (2012) cautions that to talk about any of the concepts individually may prove futile and potentially abstract them from the very context that gives each of them meaning and analytic strength. In *Reproduction* Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) illustrates this relational mode of thinking with the following formula: [(Habitus) (Capital)] + Field = Practice. The key point to be drawn from this formula is that our practices are products of relations between our dispositions (i.e. habitus) and our position in the field as determined by our possession of field specific resources (i.e. capitals), within the present context of a specific social landscape (i.e. field). This formula highlights the interconnectedness of Bourdieu's three main concepts (field, habitus and capital), something paramount to understanding the idea of social

reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986, Grenfell, 2012). Thomson (2012, p 67) emphasized this principle when she stated:

> *"Just like a football field, the social field does not stand alone. Bourdieu developed the notion of social field as one part of a means of investigating human activity. That is, by itself, the idea of a social field has insufficient explanatory 'take'. Rather than becoming bogged down in aimless debates about the primacy of either social structures or human agency, Bourdieu argued for a methodology that would bring together an inter-depended and co-constructed trio – the field, capital and habitus - with none of them primary, dominant or causal. Each was integral to understanding the social world, and the three were entangled together in a Gordian knot which could only be understood through case-by-case deconstructions".*

3.2.1 Field

Bourdieu suggests that in order to understand interactions between people, or to explain an event or social phenomenon, it is insufficient to only look at what was said or what happened. It is necessary to examine the "social space" in which such interactions, transactions and events occurred (Crossley, 2012). Society, according to Bourdieu (1986) is constituted by a variety of social fields e.g. the field of politics, education, culture, economy etc. These social fields are hierarchically made up of individuals and institutions that dominate and those who are dominated depending on their possession of field specific resources (capital) in relation to each other (Bourdieu, 1986). Social fields are therefore arenas where individuals and institutions contest for their transformation while others employ strategies to preserve and maintain their status quo (Naidoo, 2004; Crossley, 2012).

Thomson (2012, p66) uses a "football field" analogy in order to illustrate Bourdieu's notion of social fields. For Bourdieu, like in a football game, a social field represents a bordered social space in which the game is played, with each player allocated his/her predetermined position in the field. The field has stipulated rules that every player must learn, from basic to professional skills. Like a football game, each player's movement is also restricted to his or her position in the field. The game taking place in the field is very competitive, resulting in players employing different *strategies* to preserve and improve their position within the hierarchical social field. In addition, the conditions of the field also affect how the game is played and what individual different players are capable of achieving in the field (Thomson, 2012).

To Bourdieu, social fields are inherently unevenly and hierarchically structured, with players' positions in the hierarchy dependent on their portfolio and volume of field specific resources (capital) (Naidoo, 2004). Thomson (2012) state that in these social fields, individuals or institutions that take-off in possession of idealized forms of capital are advantaged from the onset as the social field depends on and produces more of such capital. As a result, those who have inherited idealized and requisite forms of capital, from the onset, occupy dominant positions whilst those who are not so lucky occupy subordinate positions within the social field. Dominance in social fields comes with decision making powers that the dominant group uses to create rules that govern and preserve their position within the social field. The relative autonomy of each social field is said to enable the dominant group to disguise domination to look and feel seemingly natural and neutral (Thomson, 2012).

3.2.2 Capital

Capital, in Bourdieu's theory, refers to field specific resources that, when possessed, determine one's membership, status and position in certain fields of power (Bourdieu,1986). We are all said to occupy a specific position in society, and that these positions primarily depend on the volume and composition of capitals we possess. Although Bourdieu allocates everyone a portfolio of capital, it varies in volume, composition, and value attached to it. Importantly, the value of one's portfolio of capital at a given moment is dependent on the social field in which one is located at that specific time, for example, scientific capital among a community of academics (Naidoo, 2004; Crossley, 2012).

Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes between economic, social, cultural and symbolic forms of capital. Economic capital refers to one's possession of material resources, such as money, that are are also convertible into social, cultural and symbolic advantage (Grenfell, 2012). Members of the elite social class are said to deploy their largely inherited economic capital in a manner that reproduces their social and cultural dominance in society. Like all other types of capital, economic capital is unevenly distributed, giving advantage to the dominant class over the marginalized. This type of capital is particularly easily transferred from one generation to another when compared to others (Sullivan, 2001).

For Bourdieu, beyond material possessions (economic capital), power and dominance in society is also an outcome of one's possession of certain cultural attributes/resources (cultural capital) and

belonging to certain social networks (social capital) (Crossley, 2012). Defined as non-economic and field specific resources that enables the transfer of privilege from one generation to the next, cultural capital is one of Bourdieu's most prominent concepts and has attracted attention than any of Bourdieu's theoretical constructs. Cultural capital comprises of endowments such as knowledge, skills, competencies, and dispositions acquired from one's social origins and passed on through generations (Sullivan, 2001). These elite family-acquired 'abilities' and 'competencies' are in turn recognized and rewarded by the education system and educators themselves, resulting in socially unequal patterns of educational experience and outcomes (Sullivan, 2001; Tzanakis, 2011).

Cultural capital exists in three different forms: objectified, embodied and institutionalized (Bourdieu,1986). In its objectified form, cultural capital is represented in material possessions such as art works, galleries, museums, laboratories, scientific instruments that are present throughout one's upbringing. These material objects' mere presence at home is said to wield an educative effect unto middle and upper class children. Objects such as scientific instruments and art have to be consumed for one to access cultural capital in its embodied form and that material objects such as paintings, galleries and scientific instruments are only accessible to families with enough economic capital. This means that objectified cultural capital is seized by those who can afford it in its material form as well as symbolically through embodied cultural capital. In its embodied form, cultural capital is integrated physically within our consciousness and physical features and it is said to be represented by our knowledge, abilities and capabilities. Our embodied cultural capital influences our body language skills, memory, postures and lifestyles (Grenfell, 2012). Bourdieu further break down cultural capital into its institutionalized form . An example of institutionalized capital can be seen in the prestige conferred as a result of one's possession of academic qualification from an elite institutions of higher learning (Naidoo, 2004).

Bourdieu (1986, p248) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual and potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group- which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a credential which entitles them to credit , in various senses of the word". Belonging to elite social networks is also linked to improved odds of educational attainment , occupational and social advance.

Through the concept of symbolic capital, Bourdieu highlight the significance of social recognition, illustrating that the value attached to any form of capital depends largely on social recognition. Simply put, some things are more valuable than others because we recognize them as such. Given the significance of social recognition in society, some capital assets have double value (Moore, 2012). For example, having a university degree is not only advantageous in that it increases one's chances of earning an income (economic capital), but it also raises one's status (symbolic capital) in society given the social recognition that follows a university degree.

3.2.3 Habitus

Another important pillar of Bourdieu's reproduction theory is the concept of habitus. Its meaning has been subjected to multiple interpretations (Maton, 2012). Key dimensions of this concept get clearer in how Bourdieu refers to it across some of his notable work. In *In Other Words* Bourdieu (1990, p13) defined habitus as '…a system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action". Habitus refers to how we as individuals embody a set of social class specific attributes that we acquire since our formative years. One's habitus is therefore essentially one's culture embodied, like "society written into the body, into the biological individual" (Bourdieu, 1990, p63). According to Maton (2012), it is important to distinguish habitus from our consciously held views and beliefs , as habitus operates at a level below the conscious yet it continues to inform how we act, feel and see the world.

Secondly, scholars (Crozier et al, 2008; Crossley, 2012; Maton, 2012) refer to a *working-class habitus or a middle-class habitus* to denote that our habitus, in the main, reflects our social class. This is not to imply homogeneity between people, but rather to say in how they experience and see the world, working class people share a lot more in common than they do with the privileged upper class. Thirdly, in *Logic of Practice* (1980, p53) Bourdieu further refers to habitus as a system of "durable, transposable dispositions". In other words, our habitus is durable in that it dates back to our formative years, socialized and molded solid as we adult. Drawing from Emile Durkheim's *Selected Writings on Education,* Pickering (2006) quotes: *"in each of us, to differing degrees is contained the person we were yesterday...our past personae predominate, since the present is necessarily insignificant compared with the long period of the past...It is just that we do not directly feel the influence of these past selves precisely because they are so deeply rooted in us. They constitute the unconscious part of ourselves".* In other words, we embody our past

so much that it becomes what we consider our second nature, thus our habitus quietly shapes what we often refer to as our natural self, including our thoughts, taste, feelings and decisions. Habitus is transposable in that individuals belonging to the same social class are more likely to feel, prefer and behave similarly in more than one field, be it at school or at work, guided by their "collective unconsciousness" .

According to Maton (2012), Bourdieu adopts the concept of habitus to transcend the dichotomies that underlie the dominant binary way of thinking about the social world. Through habitus, Bourdieu illustrates how the agency and structure shape each other (Maton, 2012). In other words, habitus captures how our practice, as individuals, shapes our environment and how the environment shapes our practices in return. For Bourdieu (1977) habitus is "a structured and structuring structure". Habitus is said to be "structured" by our past and present conditions such as family and educational background. It is "structuring" in that our habituses shapes our current and future practices. Additionally, it is a "structure" that formulates and influences how we perceive the social world, what we appreciate or dislike and our practices in general. A habitus "expresses first the result of an organising action, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure; it also designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination " (Bourdieu, 1977; p214)

Habitus therefore captures why we as individuals, groups or institutions act in certain ways and not others (Maton, 2012). It conceptualizes how our history influences our present practices and the choices we make over others (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). We are said to be continuously in a process of history making under material conditions that are not entirely of our own making. Our present position in life is as a result of countless past occurrences as well as occurrences in our daily lives which influence how we respond to a variety of choices we are constantly faced with and our subsequent actions and beliefs. The choices visible to us and the ones that are not are equally dependent on our individual and collective history since our past has, in a significant way, helped shape our visions for the future (Maton, 2012).

It is important, however, to note that our habituses are neither fixed nor constant, they evolve with time (Bourdieu, 1977). Our choices in turn shape our future possibilities, for any choice involves foregoing alternatives and sets us on a particular path that further shapes our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Likewise, the social landscape through which we pass are themselves evolving according to their own logics to which we individually and

collectively contribute (Maton, 2012). Bourdieu, therefore, posit that in order to understand social practices one needs an appreciation of both the evolving fields within which actors are situated and the evolving habituses which those actors bring to their social fields of practice (Grenfell, 2012).

A careful exploration of the potential match or mismatch between their working-class students' habituses and the university's institutional habitus becomes relevant to my study's key objectives. Drawing from the assumptions of Bourdieu's notion of habitus and relating them back to our research question, it should also be interesting to observe how the habituses of working class students are shaped and /or in turn shape different HEIs that are undergoing constant transformation and how this reality, in turn, affects their working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education.

The famous "fish out of water" expression is often used to capture Bourdieu's presentation of field and habitus as relational structures, particularly when applied to the field of higher education (Bourdieu, 1990; Grenfell, 2012; Maton, 2012). It is not uncommon for two individuals (students) to walk into the same social scene (in this case a university) and feel completely different, with one person feeling at home, like a "fish in water" and another feeling completely out of place, like a "fish out of water". The habitus of the person feeling like a "fish in water" matches the logic of the field and is in tune with the unwritten "rules of the game". The habitus of the person feeling like a "fish out of water" is said to not match that of the social field (Bourdieu, 1990). Since different HEIs have different outlooks, impact on of the potential match or mismatch between working class students' habituses and the institutional habitus is therefore worth exploring.

3.3 Bourdieu and the Field of Higher Education

Of paramount importance to this study is exploring the strengths and limitations of Bourdieu's reproduction theory in aiding an improved understanding of working-class students' experiences of non-completion and completion at different South African HEIs. Bourdieu brings together his core constructs of capital, habitus and field to explain how higher education institutions contribute to the reproduction of socially unequal patterns of educational attainment in society (Bourdieu and Passeron,1977; 1986; Naidoo, 2004; Grenfell, 2012). Specifically, in reproduction theory, the field of higher education is theorized as significant contributor to the reproduction and maintenance of social inequality. To this effect, Bourdieu identifies a number of characteristics through which the

HEIs reproduce socially stratified educational experiences and outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, p54) :

> *Every institutionalized educational system (ES) owes the specific characteristics of its structure and functioning to the fact that, by the means proper to the institution, it has to produce and reproduce the institutional conditions whose existence and persistence (self reproduction of the system) are necessary both to the exercise of its essential function of inculcation and to the fulfilment of its function of reproducing a cultural arbitrary which it does not produce (cultural reproduction), the reproduction of which contributes to the reproduction of the relations between the groups or classes (social reproduction).*

Bourdieu equate educational institutions to cultural organizations that recognize, reward reproduce and transmit the culture of the dominant class. From his studies of the French higher education system, Bourdieu demonstrates how the habitus gives students an unequal feel of the field of higher education game depending on their social origins (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Elite social origins give privileged children requisite and idealized forms of capital. Possession of requisite and idealized forms of capital gives privileged children the basic dispositions necessary to succeed in a field of education that already rewards their elite cultural attributes, enabling them to master the rules of the education game (Maton, 2012). In contrast, children of the subordinate social classes in education are said to not only lack the requisite capitals, they are said to, as a result, feel inadequate and accept failure as inevitable (Maton, 2012). Students' aspirations and expectations, their sense of what is reasonable or unreasonable, likely or unlikely, their beliefs about what are the obvious actions to take and the natural ways of doing them, are all, according to Bourdieu, not natural but rather conditioned by their class specific habituses (Maton, 2012).

Whilst elite domination in the social field comes with the power and ability to make judgments on cultural differences, the point however is to create an environment whereby social inequalities seem natural, inevitable and sometimes even just (Naidoo, 2004; Thomson, 2012). Many agree that the reproductive role of educational institution is hidden and perpetuated under the cloaks of meritocracy where educational success and attainment is equated to individual merit and aptitude. Educational institutions that reward elite cultural attributes poses children of the dominant class as talented and gifted, while shunning children of the marginalized social classes as incapable and incompetent. According to Bourdieu, reproduction in education settings persists because both the dominant and subordinate succumb to biased meritocracy as natural. The process he referred to

as symbolic violence: "symbolic violence is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu, 1992, p167). Cultural reproduction and symbolic violence, in turn, facilitate and perpetuate patterns of social inequality as educational qualifications increasingly become a primary requirement for occupational and social advancement.

Reay , Crozier and Clayton (2009) draw our attention to the influence of different universities' institutional habituses on working class students' identities, experiences and outcomes in higher education. The three found the class profile of different HEIs to offer varying social and learning environments that either hinder or enable the success of working-class students in higher education. While the highly regarded elite institutions are endowed enough to offer well resourced and supportive environment for working class students, their unfamiliar social and cultural environment come with the challenge of living and studying in spaces that look nothing like working-class home and communities. Consequently, "working-class students attaining places at elite universities face not only academic challenge, but also considerable identity work, and the discomforts generated when habitus confronts a starkly unfamiliar field" (Reay et al, 2009, p. 14). Therefore, despite reported success stories amongst working class students who make it at elite institutions, the bigger picture remains one of classed an racialized inequality in both patterns of access and success. It would therefore be interesting to explore how the social and learning environments at different HEIs in South Africa are enabling or hindering the odds of working-class completion in higher education.

3.4 Potential areas of theoretical contribution

In addition to the empirical gaps identified and addressed in the Chapter 2 , below I briefly review gaps in reproduction theory and how it has been employed to explain social disparities in educational attainment. These studies have helped me identify theoretical gaps necessitating further inquiry and have shaped my research question(s) and proposed methodology in this area of enquiry. Bourdieu theorizes that due to an unequal distribution of cultural, social, economic and symbolic capitals, children from dominant elite families and communities are more positioned to succeed in higher education institutions than their working-class counterparts (Bourdieu and Passeron,1977). Barone (2006) contends that although Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides a relevant account of stratification in educational achievement, it is far from exhaustive. Theorizing working class students as inherently deficient and problematic presents potential gaps in Bourdieu's framework (Crozier and Reay, 2011).

In this study I contend that both Bourdieu and those who have employed his theoretical constructs to study working class experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education have paid insufficient attention to the transformative potential of portfolio of capital and dispositions that working-class students may bring to higher education. This study seeks to contribute in filling this gap by examining working class students' portfolios of capital and dispositions upon arrival in higher education, and how both working class graduates and dropouts further accumulate, convert and trade in a manner that multiplies their chances of successful completion in higher education. The goal is to illuminate working class students' experiences of capital *accumulation, alignment, conversion and trading* in a manner that multiplies their odds of successful completion at different HEIs and how such experiences alter and further develop predominantly reproductive understandings of working-class completion and non-completion in higher education. Overall, my study advocates for a strong departure from the common one-sidedly deficit theorization of working-class students in higher education. Importantly, I attempt to illuminate the benefits adopting a transformative perspective to Bourdieu's theoretical constructs (Mills, 2008) in examining working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education.

Secondly, the influence of working-class students' social and cultural origins on their higher education experience is mostly theorized through reproductive and deficit lens. Much of what is written about the experience of this group of students in higher education seeks to affirm working class social and cultural origins as a hinderance to their odds of completion (Crozier and Reay, 2011; Arbouin, 2018). For example, the theorization of ethnic-minority working-class parents (cultural capital) in relation to their children's odds at educational attainment is almost always negative (Arbouin, 2018). Additionally, the focus is excessively tilted on how middle- and upper-class parents set up their children for success, and less so on the potentially transformative role of working-class origins and the potentially transformative role played by working class parents in aiding the success of the unlikely working-class graduates in higher education institutions and important lessons that can be drawn from their lived experiences (Arbouin, 2018). While many working-class students fail to complete, a small but significant number of them manage to successfully complete their studies with a visibly positive role played by their working-class parents and significant others .The experience of the unlikely working class graduates suggest that this group of students does not arrive in HEIs empty handed, they possess a portfolio of capital and

dispositions from which they draw in order to go over the finish line and this includes support from their working-class parents and communities (Yosso, 2005; Crozier and Reay, 2011).

In my study, the extent to which Bourdieu's reproduction theory can account for both working class dropouts and graduates at different HEIs is critically examined in an attempt to contribute towards this critical area of inquiry i.e. the transformative potential Bourdieu's theoretical constructs in studying working class experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education (Mills, 2008). I contend that while Bourdieu's thinking tools are great in enabling us to see the reproductive side of the field of higher education, they are equally capable of illuminating opportunities for transformation and redress in higher education. In other words, while Bourdieu's theoretical constructs clearly expose conditions that perpetuate working class non-completion in higher education, they also offer insight into how working-class completion can be improved. The concepts of *'working class community cultural wealth (*Yosso, 2005), *'Capital Accumulation (*Crozier and Reay, 2011) *, 'Capital Realignment'* (Lin, 2014), *'Transformative Habitus' (Mills, 2008) and 'The multiplier effect' (*Crul et al, 2017) have already laid a solid foundation in advocating for research that diverges from the dominant deficit theorization of working class students in higher education , and shed light on transformative potential of Bourdieu's theoretical constructs in aiding an improved understanding of working class students' experiences in higher education. My study builds on and take this work further.

For example, in terms of cultural capital, instead of academically rewarding students in possession of dominant cultural capital, elite social ties and economic resources, Mills (2008, 84) suggest that educational institutions could broaden "the types of cultural capital that are valued in the classroom". Teachers can achieve this transformation objective by adjusting the curriculum to reflect locally produced knowledge which is likely to be familiar to most learner's lived experience and, by so doing making the classroom a more inclusive space. This way, Mills (2008) submit, teachers or lecturers can become agents of transformation rather than reproduction of social and cultural inequalities in educational outcomes.

Thirdly , in terms of habitus, whilst one acknowledges that a working-class habitus may nudge working class students to comply and submit to HEIs' constraining conditions and leave them inclined to rule out the possibility of success as inconceivable (Crozier & Reay,2011), opportunities for transformation are evident in working class students endowed with what Yosso (2005) referred to as aspirational and navigational capital as part of the 'community cultural wealth' they bring to

educational institutions. Contrary to reproduction theorists, a working-class habitus may influence working-class students to perceive constraining conditions in higher education as less of an obstacle for success and more of a challenge worth taking on (Mills, 2008). In this case, marginalized students may develop what Mills (2008, p83) terms a *transformative habitus* which enables them to "recognize possibilities for improvisation" and approach their studies in ways that transform their conditions and improve their chances of success. Marginalized students that develop a transformative habitus would therefore conduct themselves in a manner that make things happen in higher education as opposed to sitting back and accept defeat. Crozier & Reay (2011) , Mills (2008) and Arbouin (2018) all suggest that, with the help of transformation-oriented teachers and HEIs with a transformative institutional habitus, working class students' habitus can be restructured in a manner that improves their odds of successful completion in higher education.

Significant work has gone into highlighting how a 'working class habitus' is responsible for working class students' sense of alienation and lack of belonging in way that makes them, feel like a "fish out of water" (Bourdieu, 1990). My study puts this one-sidedly deficit theory of working class habituses on trial by exploring how narrative accounts of working-class graduates and dropouts may contradict and perhaps further develop our conceptualization of the match or mismatch between working class habitus and the field of higher education. I contend that reproduction theory falls analytically short in this regard. I suggest that hailing from a working-class background may have the opposite effect to reproductive propositions. This point is stressed in numerous studies that found working class students in higher education to be resilient, determined and persistent in a manner than enables them to negotiate their way successful completion (Carter, 2006; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Aljohani, 2016). The significance of research that addresses this gap in Bourdieusian thinking is particularly highlighted and stressed by Crozier and Reay (2011) who captured how working class *students' restructured and realigned habituses*, generated resilience, courage and determination that led to the positive educational outcomes and high completion rates amongst working class university students in different HEIs in England. My study therefore challenges the reproductive assumptions about working-class students' habituses and the implications for their experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education. According to Mills (2008), this transformative potential of Bourdieu's thinking tools offers us as researchers a lens to see opportunities through which the education system can improve the educational outcomes of underprivileged students. Her position strongly resonates with the objectives of my study and further present an area my study attempts to further develop.

Lastly, students' experiences of higher education vary significantly across different HEIs (Thomas, 2002) . In light of higher non-completion rates amongst first-generation working-class students in the UK, Crozier and her colleagues (2008) explored how working class students' experiences of higher education compare to their middle-class counterparts across different HEIs. They found that universities with the most success in widening participation also had the highest dropout rate. They concluded that:

> *"in terms of students' experiences, an interrelated spectrum of differentiated experiences exists across and within the institutions rather than a simply stark polarization. This is structured by the differential wealth and organization of the universities , and their expectations of students, the subject sub-cultures, and students' own socio-cultural locations, namely class, gender, age and ethnicity"*

In my study, I am interested in how the higher education experiences *within* working class students compare across different status South African universities and the extent to which these differences relate to experiences of completion and non-completion. This is an important area of inquiry and development given the polarised history South African Universities and their respective habituses. Naidoo (2004) configured the historic and hierarchical composition of South African Higher education into three tiers: "dominant tier", "intermediate tier", and a "subordinate tier". On top of the hierarchy is the dominant tier which consist of well-endowed, research intensive, world-renowned and elite English-medium universities originally established exclusively for white English-speaking South Africans under colonial and apartheid laws. The intermediate tier consisted of relatively well-endowed Afrikaans-medium universities originally established exclusively for white Afrikaans speaking students, some of whom merged with historically black universities to form what become known as mergers. The subordinate tier consisted of the mostly rural based and grossly under resourced universities reserved for blacks only. Despite the policy level non-racialism, higher education in post-apartheid South African remains visibly polarised along historic racial , spatial and class lines, with predominately black and working class rural universities remaining at the bottom of the pyramid. It will be interesting to see how working-class students' experiences and outcomes compare across the different South African universities.

In summary, when analysing participants' narrative accounts, I draw from the wealth Bourdieuan literature and the key concepts that shed light on transformative side of working-class educational experiences: *Community Cultural Capital* (Yosso, 2005); *Capital Accumulation* (Crozier and Reay, 2011); *the Multiplier Effect* (Crul et al, 2017) , and *Transformative Habitus* and *Agents of Transformation* by Mills (2008). First, I will draw from Yosso's (2005) notion of familial, social, aspirational,

navigational, resistant and linguistic capital as pillars that constitute community cultural wealth prevalent amongst marginalized class communities. By *Aspirational Capital ,* Yosso (2005, p. 77) refers to marginalized communities' "ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals". *Familial capital* refers to "cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition". *Social capital* refers to the "networks of people and community resources" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). *Navigational capital* refers to "skills of manoeuvring through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to manoeuvre through institutions not created with Communities of Colour in mind. For example, strategies to navigate through racially-hostile university campuses draw on the concept of academic invulnerability, or students' ability to 'sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school and, ultimately, dropping out". *Resistant capital* refers to "knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behaviour that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

Secondly, I draw from Crozier and Reay's (2011) notion of *capital accumulation* in order to explore how working-class students, despite starting on the backfoot, manage to access the means to succeed (capital accumulation) across and within different higher education contexts. Crozier and Reay (2011, p. 155) posit that "whilst capitals have relative value within and across the universities, the process to acquire these (whatever their value) is uneven and unequal between the different contexts". Thirdly, I embrace Crul et al (2017, p. 321) and their concept of "*the multiplier effect"* to explain how resilience, strong social skills, exposure to coping with different environments at an early age, social support from parents and significant others, enables working class students to navigate the education system in a manner that multiplies their chances of success.

In this case, marginalized students may develop what Mills (2008, p83) adopts the terms *transformative habitus* to explain how marginalized students "recognize possibilities for improvisation" and approach their studies in ways that transform their conditions and improve their chances of success. Marginalized students that develop a transformative habitus would therefore conduct themselves in a manner that make things happen in higher education as opposed to sitting back and accept defeat. The higher education experience of this group of students is said to particularly benefit from what Mills (2008) refers to as "agents of transformation" i.e. individuals within higher education who "draw upon a variety of cultural capitals" to disrupt the reproductive cycle in working class students' journey to and through higher education.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented and justified my choice of Bourdieu's theoretical framework from a host of theories that seek to explain inequality of education experience and outcomes in higher education. I found his theory to provide powerful and widely applicable and adaptable theoretical constructs that compliment my study's objective to explore narrative accounts of failure and success amongst working class students in South African higher education. Bourdieu particularly present an alternative paradigm to theories of educational meritocracy and their notion of educational attainment as divorced from social origins. Bourdieu's key concepts of capital, habitus and field were critically explored in relation to working class experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education. I found Bourdieu's theory to offer powerful analytical lens for those of us in pursuit of transformation, redress and social justice in higher education and society in general. Despite notable gaps in his reproduction emphasis, I conclude that Bourdieu's theoretical framework offers a unique and helpful approach for understanding inequality of educational attainment.

In the next chapter I present and justify my choice of methodology and study design.

Chapter Four: Telling Stories: Methodology and Research Design

4.1 Introduction

…in a vastly unequal society like South Africa, social and cultural practices involve resisting multiple forms of discrimination at school and in communities that have influenced the literacy development of university students for years. In this context, we should read student literacy narratives not as mere performances of language acquisition and usage but as an attempt to explain the interplay of different facets of their lives on their literacy development. These narrative accounts remind us not to ignore the fact that the way first year students think, speak, write and read are shaped by their lived experiences in marginalised and privileged communities.

Angu (2018, p.10)

This chapter outlines my study's methodological choices, influences and justifications. I reflect on how my personal journey as a working-class graduate and how this experience led me to examine Pierre Bourdieu's work methodologically and theoretically. The study's context is clarified, and ethical issues are considered. I then explain and justify my choice of narrative inquiry from a host of qualitative methods, and how data was analyzed.

4.2 Overall Methodological Choices and Bourdieu's Influence

At the centre of my study's methodological choices is the research questions I sought to explore. What are the potentials and limitations of Bourdieu's reproduction theory in aiding an improved understanding of financial aid funded black working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at different South African universities? How do working-class dropouts and graduates, as well as other key members of the university community narrate their experiences of working-class completion and non-completion at different South African Universities? Within the context of higher education transformation and widening participation policies, what lessons can we draw from these narrative accounts? The main objective of this study is to present participants' viewpoints, whilst acknowledging my subjective position as a working-class graduate. Consequently, I use plenty of excerpts from participants' interviews to foreground the depth and wealth of insights in their narratives.

My position as a researcher matters. Bourdieu (1992) places significant emphasis on the researcher's social origins, dispositions and position in the social field. Bourdieu's notion of

reflexivity suggest that, throughout the research process, I remain alive to my biases and assumptions, and study participants' narratives mindful of the context in which they are narrated. It is my background as a son of a cleaner and a late primary school teacher, and my experience as a student activist and Student Union President at one of South Africa's Ivory Tower Institutions that inspired me to closely study working class experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education. Although I always enjoyed listening to stories, I became familiar with the power of narratives in educational research during Professor Yiannis Gabriel's module on *Approaches to Management and Organizational Research* in 2015.

We tell stories every day. We do so in order to not only make sense of the world around us, but to also interpret our varied and shared experiences for ourselves and for others (Bruner, 1991). It is through narratives that students make sense of their lives whilst providing the researcher with valuable insight into their journeys to and through educational institutions (Angu, 2018). Moen (2006) supports the use of narratives in educational research by placing particular value on the ability of narratives to capture complexities and multidimensionality of educational experiences. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 2) explain the main claim for the use of narrative in educational research:

> "Narrative inquiry is increasingly used in studies of educational experience. It has a long intellectual history both in and out of education. The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories"

My study's focus on social inequality in educational attainment makes Bourdieu's reproduction theory particularly relevant. He identified higher education as one of the primary agents of reproducing and maintaining social inequalities across generations (Grenfell, 2012). Several studies have sought to examine inequality in educational attainment *between* social classes i.e. between working class students and their privileged middle- and upper-class counterparts, with a specific focus on reasons for working class failure in education. In this particular study, I deliberately avoid this common deficit lens through which many have sought to look at working class students in higher education. I am interested in the extent at which Bourdieu's reproduction theory can

account for disparities in educational attainment *within* a working-class group of students in higher education (i.e. financial aid funded working class graduates and dropouts). In other words, I am as interested in understanding working class students' experiences of 'failure' in higher education, as I am in their 'success'.

In this study, all participating students are black and of rural and township origin. Importantly, in South Africa black and working class are two sides of the same subordinate coin, and whiteness and privilege are two sides of the same dominant coin (NDP,2011).

In her study of black British graduates Arbouin (2018, p.5) discourages the habitual use of a white control group when studying black experiences because "all white studies do not require a black control group to validate them". I too sought to diverge from this trend that, in a way, undermines "black experiences and perspectives by measuring them against a white norm" (Arbouin, 2018, p.5). In this study I indeed treat black working-class students as experts on their life stories and their journeys to and through different higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa (Arbouin, 2018).

Apart from the theoretical contribution, my study seeks to contribute empirically towards an improved understanding of working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education, by examining narrative accounts of financial aid funded black-working-class dropouts and graduates, as well as various key stakeholders (i.e. university managers, policy makers, student leaders, academic and support staff) at three different status higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. I use the term "financial aid students" to refer to working class students whose undergraduate studies were funded by the National Students Financial Aid scheme (NSFAS), a publicly funded student grant scheme meant for poor and working-class students at public South African universities. I hope insights from participants' narrative accounts can contribute towards the work of university managers and policy makers bestowed with the responsibility to transform and widen working class access and success in South African higher education and elsewhere in the world.

In-depth narrative interviews with open-ended questions were used to collect insights on participants' lived experiences and their overall perspectives on the prevalence of high non-completion and very low completion rates amongst financial aid funded working class students at

different South African HEIs. A social constructionist view of narratives is employed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Elliot, 2005).

The data collected was analyzed through a combination of Bourdieu's theoretical constructs (field, capital and habitus) and a thematic approach to narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). The two frameworks are particularly complementary in that, both take research as a collaborative interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer, both place particular significance on temporal and social experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Grenfell, 2012). By seeing value in applying Bourdieu's thinking tools in narrative study, I follow in the methodological footsteps of Allard (2005) who looked at narratives of marginalised women and Lin (2014, p. 366) who analyzed student narratives "through Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, capital and legitimation, as well as tools of narrative inquiry". I also follow the Braun and Clarke (2006) step by step guide to thematic analysis in order to illuminate key dimensions of working-class students' experiences that stand out at each of the three predetermined phases of their journeys to and through South African HEIs : *Students' Origins and Family Background*, *Pathways En Route Higher Education* , and their *higher education experience.*

Once participants' narrative accounts were collected, transcribed and read multiple times, I adopted a thematic approach to narrative analysis in order to locate commonalities, differences, surprises, and that which participants specifically declared important in relation to each theme. I paid particular attention to narratives that diverge from established 'truths' about working-class students' experiences in higher education (Riessman, 2008). My focus is on *what* is said by different participants in relation to each theme and not so much on *how* it is said. I made this choice in order to stay close to participants' voice through the use of illustrative excerpts (Riessman, 2008).

The research context is South Africa where the post-apartheid project of transforming higher education in order to achieve social redress, equity and justice is increasingly undermined by high non-completion and low completion rates amongst financial aid funded working-class students in higher education (DHET,2010).

4.3 Ontological and Epistemological Framework

From the onset it is considered good practice for the researcher to clearly articulate his or her stance with regard to the research paradigm adopted and followed. The notion of paradigms is largely credited to philosopher Thomas Kuhn's (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Kuhn (1971, p. iii) defined paradigms as "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners". In *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis* Burrell and Morgan (1979; 23) described paradigms as "a commonality of perspective which binds the work of a group of theorists together". These paradigms consist of theories, concepts and assumptions that shape our beliefs about the social world. Importantly, these paradigms consist of various ontological and epistemological beliefs about the social world (Hatch, 2002; Gabriel, 2008).

O'Gorman and MacIntosh's (2015) *Methods Map* divide ontological positions into two important categories i.e. objective ontology and subjective ontology. Although the terms subjective and objective are thrown around casually in everyday language, social science researchers stress that we clearly distinguish between the two and sometimes, in the case of Bourdieu, strive to transcend this long-standing dichotomy (Grenfell, 2012). Those who look at reality from an objective ontological stance see reality as constituted by solid facts that can be measured and tested and whose existence is independent from our perception or experience of them. In contrast, those who look at reality from a subjective ontological stance conceive reality as an output of our individual and collective perceptions and interactions (O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 2015). The questions of the two ontological positions continue to be the subject of fierce debate in social science research today with strong arguments constantly put forward from each of the opposite end of the ontological debate (Mouton and Marais, 1996; O'Gorman and MacIntosh,2015).

Ontology can be understood as a "branch of the metaphysics that deals with the nature being or reality" (O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 2015, p54). In other words, our ontological stance answers the question, "what is the nature of reality" (Hatch, 2002, p. 11). My belief in multiple subjective realities that are socially constructed and preference for storytelling locates my study on the subjective ontological stance.

Epistemology captures our views on what constitute acceptable knowledge and how that knowledge may be best acquired (Mason, 2002). Our epistemological beliefs, according to (Hatch, 2002, p. 11) tackle the question, "what can be known, and what is the relationship of the knower

to what is known". O'Gorman and MacIntosh (2015, p54) write about epistemology as a "branch metaphysics that deals with the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and foundations, and its extent and validity". Epistemological questions inform what we regard as knowledge or evidence of things in the social world, and answers to these questions help us establish the kind of epistemological position our research expresses or implements (Mouton and Marais, 1996).

A researcher's adopted epistemological stance becomes his theory of knowledge and therefore informs the set of principles and rules by which he or she decides whether and how social phenomena can be known, or how knowledge can be demonstrated (Mason, 2002). Individuals make claims about knowledge daily without justifying how such knowledge was obtained, however, in academic research, there are strict requirements attached to making claims about what is or isn't valid knowledge. Burrell and Morgan (1979) identified four epistemological positions: positivism, Interpretivism/constructivism, radical humanism and radical structuralism. There are many other epistemological beliefs in social science research, however, these four allows us to formulate our own ideas about what counts as reliable knowledge (O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 2015). Of particular significance in social science research is the distinction between positivist epistemology and interpretivist epistemology (Gabriel, 2008).

Positivism, although mainly associated with the natural sciences, has a visible presence in the social sciences (O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 2015). A positivist epistemological approach to knowledge aims to explain and predict what happens in the social world based on assumptions that reality is objective, human action is predominantly rational (Gabriel, 2008) , methodological procedures of the natural sciences may be adapted to study human social actions (O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 2015), only observable phenomena can provide credible data and facts , research outcomes will take the form of causal laws and that the results of social research are value free (Donaldson, 1996). Following on O'Gorman and MacIntosh's (2015) *Methods Model*, positivist epistemology is commonly aligned with an objective ontological stance and quantitative research.

Given our focus on constructing meanings and reality from stories participants tell about themselves and the social world, narrative enquiry researchers, according to Hatch (2002), fall within the parameters of social constructionism. Through narrative interviews, both the researcher and the participant co-construct their realities and understandings of narrative accounts in a process of meaning-making. Narrative inquirers hold that stories told do not mirror reality, instead reality is socially constructed through story telling (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Spector-Mersel (2010)

adds that through an interview, for example, the researcher invites life stories from the participant and through the process of telling stories reality is co-constructed.

My study adopted a narrative (constructionist) epistemological position to explore participants' narrative accounts of working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education. Those of us who hold constructionist epistemological beliefs recognize the existence of the multiplicity of ways of knowing, interpreting and explaining experiences. It is through stories that we as narrative researchers get closer to the meaning participants ascribe to their experiences (Clandinin and Rosick, 2007). Narrative inquiry is one of the ways in which the researcher gains rich and in-depth understandings of varied and shared educational experiences (Baptiste, 2001). Therefore, the voices and experiences of working-class graduates and dropouts as well as of key members of the university community are suitable sources of knowledge for my study (Baptiste, 2001; Quinn et al, 2005).

Rather than looking for causality and laws at a macro-level, my study explores participants' narratives in order to make a contribution towards an improved understanding of subjective and micro-level students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education (Baptiste, 2001). Ideas will be developed through induction from data as opposed to formulating hypothesis and testing them. Given the qualitative methodology approach adopted, a smaller and purposefully selected sample will be investigated in its depth (O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 2015). It is this ontological and epistemological stance that guides my choice of methodological approach and subsequent research techniques (Elliot, 2005).

4.4 Qualitative Research Approach

According to Polkinghorne (2005) qualitative research is particularly suitable for studies that seek to describe and illuminate key dimensions of participants varied and shared experiences, belief systems and perspectives. Qualitative researchers advance that reality is socially constructed through our daily interactions. In the main, qualitative researchers are concerned with *how* human beings experience the social world in its varied and shared manifestations (Polkinghorne, 2005; Silverman, 2013). It is on the basis of these characteristics that I decided on the suitability of a qualitative research approach to studying working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education. From a host of qualitative research methods, my study adopted a narrative inquiry approach (Elliot, 2005; Silverman, 2013) in order to obtain in-depth and rich descriptions of and to explore prevalent micro-level lived experiences and beliefs at play

in relation to disparities in patterns of educational attainment amongst financial aid funded black working class students at different HEIs.

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods have been employed to study inequality in educational attainment (Tzanakis, 2011). For example, Shavit and Blossfeld (1993) used quantitative methods of partial standardization to measure patterns of social inequality in educational attainment across a number of countries in the western world. Moss (2005) conducted a quantitative study to measure the effects of social origins upon graduate level achievement through the use of hundred and thirteen questionnaires. According to Grenfell (2012) Bourdieu himself also drew from large quantitative data (Grenfell, 2012). Although valuable insights can be drawn from quantitative studies, in this study I chose to give voice and audience to narratives in the margin that often go unheard (Angu, 2018).

My study follows in the footsteps of several qualitative studies that have examined inequality of attainment in higher education by listening to voices on the margins (Quinn et al, 2005; Crozier & Reay, 2011; Lin, 2014; Reay, 2017; Angu, 2018). For example, in the United Kingdom, a qualitative study by Quinn et al (2005) listened to the narratives of students, lecturers, student support staff, employers, employment agencies and community representatives in order to zoom into and explore their lived experiences, beliefs and perspectives about the causes and impact of high dropout rates amongst working class university students in post-1992 universities. My study is significantly influenced by the methodological choices employed by Quinn and her colleagues in this study (2005). I share the view that in order to gain a detailed, in-depth and micro-level understanding of working class experiences of non-completion and completion , my study needs to delve deep into the perspectives and lived experiences of students and key stakeholders involved in the project of transforming South African higher education (Lin, 2014).

In light of the persistent dropout rates amongst financial aid funded working class students in South Africa this qualitative inquiry into the life stories of both working class graduates and dropouts makes a significant contribution into long overdue methodological and empirical gap in South African higher education (DHET, 2019). Neuman (2000) suggests that in situations where little is known about the researched, it is advisable to begin with qualitative methods. He adds that the findings of such a study may assist in generating research gaps for future qualitative and quantitative studies. Additionally, qualitative methods are most appropriate if the researcher seeks to understand how and why a group of people, a community or individuals within a particular

context experience or perceive events in specific fields the way they do. In addition to adherence to the qualitative nature of my research question, Neuman's (2000) statement further back my decision to go the qualitative route. For the reasons outlined above, my study will embrace the qualitative research methodology and employ a narrative inquiry approach to address the research question.

4.5 Narrative Inquiry

4.5.1 Why Narratives?

Firstly, in recent times, a considerable number of researchers have developed a great deal of interest in narrative research and its widespread applicability in the social sciences (Lin, 2014). Scholars in educational research and sociology of education in particular have also increasingly embraced, advocated for , and found narrative inquiry particularly fruitful in exploring people's lived experiences, multiple voices, perspectives, truths and meanings (Cortazzi, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Johnson & Golombek, 2004; Moen, 2006). Of particular significance to my research question, notable qualitative studies in educational research have also employed the narrative research approach to study working class students' higher education experience (Quinn et al, 2005; Moen, 2006; Lin, 2014). I have opted for a narrative inquiry approach, consistent with a growing body of research in the sociology of education and organizational research (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Quinn et al, 2005; Lin, 2014).

Secondly, with research examining disparities in educational attainment mainly been conducted on the basis of national statistics data (Shavit and Blossfeld,1993) or individual institutional studies, I found it desirable and significant that I zoom-in into participants' individual lived experiences and perspectives in order to obtain significant in-depth and rich insights and to avoid being narrow (Quinn et al, 2005). According to Elliot (2005) narrative enquiry will enable the researcher to flash out participants' micro-level lived experiences and events that occurred over a period of time. This way a narrative enquiry approach becomes an ideal means by which I can study participants' stories as told by them and in a manner that challenges traditional and positivist views of truth, reality and knowledge (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Stories are not just stories, they are fundamental to illuminating key dimensions of our lived experiences (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest that it is through storytelling that educators come to know what they know about teaching and learning

experiences. The two therefore suggest that narrative inquiry is one of the most effective methods of understanding and representing these educational experiences.

Thirdly, narrative inquiry enables voices that are often overlooked and unheard, a space to be heard (Goodson and Sikes, 2001), thereby enabling the researcher to understand experiences of the marginalized through voices from the margins (Angu, 2018). From the literature reviewed, not enough of the voice of individual financial aid funded working-class students is heard on the topic under investigation. The present study seeks to carefully explore the issue of completion and non-completion in higher education from the perspective of those who have experienced it and to further illuminate how these lived experiences are narrated within the field of higher education (Quinn et al, 2005). Story telling also empowers participants to feel that their voices are being heard and that they matter (Angu,2018). Fourthly, through storytelling, people are able to indicate parts of their stories that carries the most significance (Elliot, 2005). From this angle it is clear that narrative method provides information in greater depth and context. This approach enabled me as the researcher to access subtle individual and institutional issues through the stories told by the participants (Angu, 2018).

Lastly and perhaps more importantly, narrative enquiry brings greater awareness to the subjective role of the interviewer as more than just a collector of data, but a co-constructor of knowledge together with the interviewee (Elliot, 2005). Therefore, one will have to bear in mind that stories are reconstructions of people's experiences, that they are remembered and told at a particular point in people's lives, to a particular audience and to achieve a particular purpose (Sandelowski, 1991). An appreciation and mindfulness of the role and impact of these factors on how stories are told, which stories are told and how these stories are presented or interpreted in life narrative research made this research method particularly comprehensive, far-reaching and suitable to address my research question (Sandelowski, 1991).

4.5.2 Constructing Narratives

Within the broader qualitative methodology there are several approaches one could adopt to study educational experiences (Silverman, 2013). Narrative inquiry makes four basic propositions, according to Moen (2006): a) people organize their lived experiences into stories; b) the stories we tell are underwritten by our past and present experiences, our values, the audience of our stories and the context in which we are telling the stories; c) that narrative research recognizes and

appreciate the diversity in narratives ; d) and that narrative research has as its focus how people story meaning into their lives.

In her *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry* Clandinin (2006) lists key features of narrative inquiry that distinguishes the approach from other qualitative methodologies **: firstly, emphasis is placed more on the individual story than commonalities across interviews; secondly, narratives illuminate temporal features or phases in participants' unique life stories**; and thirdly, in narrative inquiry **the uniqueness of individual stories is celebrated not downplayed**. Narrative analysis falls within the bounds of narrative inquiry paradigm and the researcher' report is therefore a story about storied experiences (Clandinin, 2006).

From the onset an important distinction must be made between narratives as objects of study and narratives as tools of investigation and analysis (Ylijoki, 2001). We must distinguish between *analysis of narratives* and *narrative analysis* (Polkinghorne, 1995). In the former, stories are collected as data to be analyzed according to a model of reasoning in order to identify and describe common themes, types of stories, characters or settings obtained from data collected. In contrast, narrative analysis follows "the logic of narrative mode of thought. Researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and configure them into a story or stories. In other words, the aim is to discern a plot that unites and gives meaning to the elements in the data as contributions to a specific goal or purpose" (Ylijoki (2001, p.24). Polkinghorne (1995, p12) cement this important distinction by stating that while "analysis of narratives moves from stories to common elements, narrative analysis move from common elements to stories". In this study I move from participants' descriptions of their varied and shared experiences of working-class completion and non-completion in higher education as narrated and then re-construct their stories to illuminate key dimensions of their origins and family background, their pathways en route higher education and their higher education experience at different South African HEIs. My study therefore follows the logic of narrative analysis and the empirical grounding of these analysis will be based on the narrative accounts of working-class dropouts and graduates, as well as purposefully selected key members of the university community in South Africa (Polkinghorne, 1995; Ylijoki, 2010).

The primary focus in this study is not so much on recurrent themes across interviews, but rather on specific insights in participants' narratives that elucidate and illuminate key dimensions of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at

different South African HEIs. To achieve this, I use plenty of illustrative excerpts from participants' interviews to foreground the depth and wealth of insights in their stories.

Narrative research may serve a descriptive or explanatory purpose (Sandelowski, 1991). Sandelowski (1991; p163) states that in descriptive narrative research, the researcher aims to "describe; a) individual and group narratives of life stories or particular life episodes; b) the conditions under which one storyline or emplotment and signification of events, prevails over, coheres with, or conflicts with other story lines; c) the relationship between individual stories; and d) the function that certain life episodes serves in individuals' emplotment of their lives". Explanatory narrative research on the other hand seeks to explain why something happened. My study employed the logic of descriptive narrative research (Sandelowski, 1991).

Additionally, my study brings together narrative framework and Bourdieu's theoretical constructs of capital, field and habitus to understand unequal educational experiences and outcomes amongst working class students. The two frameworks have proven complimentary where they have been applied together (Quinn et al, 2005; Lin, 2014). Both frameworks appreciate to the temporality and social nature of lived experiences and, they consider interviews as a collaborative interaction between the researcher and participants. Lin (2014, p.366) studied *realigning capital portfolios in international students' experiences in higher education,* by analyzing students' "narratives through Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, capital and legitimation, as well as tools of narrative inquiry".

4.6 Study Design

4.6.1 Context

This study explores financial aid funded working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education by examining narrative accounts of working-class graduates and dropouts as well as various key stakeholders (i.e. University Managers, Policy Makers, student leaders, academic and support staff) at three different status higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa in order to gain an improved understanding of the prevalence of high dropout rates and low completion rates amongst this group of students. As acknowledged in Chapter Two, the concept of class is understood differently amongst scholars and across disciplines (Jakopovich, 2014) and the lack of a universally accepted definition of the working-class presents challenges for educational researchers examining experiences of 'working class students' (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). The Cambridge Dictionary defines 'working-class' as "a social group that consists of people

who earn little, often being paid only for the hours or days that they work, and who usually do physical work". The idea of defining working class students according to their parents' social class attributes, i.e. parents' educational, occupational and income level, can be problematic across contexts (Jakopovich, 2014).

The South African context further complicate the class picture. In South Africa the term commonly used is *'poor and working-class students'* and it is designated to a section of the student population on the basis of their household income. The household income is not limited to parents' income, it can be anyone from grandparents to uncles, for as long as they are sworn guardians of the student (DHET, 2011). Until December 2017, undergraduate students from households earning below R122 000 per annum were considered poor and working class, as determined by the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Due to the higher education funding policy reforms that took place in December 2017, this figure was revised to R350 000 per annum, accounting for over 93% of South African households. Therefore, the concept of working-class students in this study is employed to refer to students from households earning below a combined annual income of R122 000, whose undergraduate studies were funded by NSFAS at a public South African university. The data for this study was collected under the pre-December 2017 definition of poor and working-class students.

Why examine experiences of financial aid funded working class students in South Africa? There are several reasons: Firstly, these students are beneficiaries of the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) , a financial aid scheme established and administered by the South African government and bestowed with a historic and supreme task to transform higher education in order to redress the socio-economic legacy of colonialism and apartheid that has polarized South Africa into one of the most unequal societies in the world today (NDP, 2010; Times Magazine, 2019). Secondly, the sustainability of the NSFAS policy objectives and South Africa's transformation project continues to be severely undermined by the prevalence of high dropout rates and low completion rates amongst NSFAS funded working class students across HEIs (DHET, 2018). Thirdly, NSFAS beneficiaries represent children of the most vulnerable and marginalized families and communities in South Africa and improving their higher education experience is pivotal to addressing the legacy of colonialism and the achievement of redress and social justice in post-apartheid higher education and South Africa as a whole.

4.6.2 Data Collection

Participants and Sampling Procedure

A total of forty-six narrative interviews were conducted with twenty-four working class graduates and dropouts and twenty-two university managers, policy makers, members of academic and support staff at the three different universities. Given my choice of qualitative methodology framework and narrative inquiry's focus on acquiring rich, in-depth and context specific data, this sample size is considered appropriate (Willig, 2013). Generalizability and representativeness were not of concern in this study (Patton, 1990).

I relied on a combination of purposeful sampling, maximum variation sampling and snow-balling techniques (Patton, 1990; Neuman, 2000). Through purposeful sampling I selected research participants because they are likely to generate rich and useful data. I complimented purposeful sampling with maximum variation sampling to ensure that my sampling adequately covers the three universities. Participants sample included working-class dropouts, working class graduates, university managers, heads of department, policy makers, student union leaders, academic and support staff in order to honor the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives , and to avoid the common one dimensionally deficit perspective on working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education. One major benefit of maximum variation sampling is that it enables the researcher to access the diversity of insights across different contexts (Elliot, 2005).

All participating students were selected and deemed eligible on the basis of having had their undergraduate studies funded by NSFAS at a South African public university. They were distinguished by type of community (township or rural), fields of study, gender, type of accommodation and type of institution. It was particularly difficult to locate students who had dropped out. Given that they currently residing in their rural and township homes, I had to drive to rural and township communities and find a comfortable and discrete interview location. Fortunately, through snowball technique one participant led me to another (Patton, 1990). The shame and stigma that follows dropouts seemed to make it particularly difficult for some of them to talk about their understandably sad ending to their higher education experience. All non-student participants (e.g. academic and support staff) were also distinguished by institutional roles, gender, race, and type of institution. Singh et al (2014, p154) suggests that approach will yield a "fine-grained account" of each individual's perspective and lived experiences, providing valuable

insight into the topic under investigation. This approach to sampling has been used in studies looking into non-completion in higher education by Quinn et al (2005) , as well as in other fields (Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Singh et al, 2014).

Research participants were purposefully selected from across three universities selected from three categories of universities in South Africa. The South African field of university education is hierarchically structured into three tiers: the dominant Historically White Institutions (HWIs), the subordinate Historically Black Institutions (HBIs) and the intermediate New Comprehensive Mergers (Naidoo, 2004).

The dominant tier consists of well-resourced elite and highly selective universities previously reserved for white students only. Ivory Tower University belong to this tier. It is a racially diverse but predominantly middle and upper class, with its top ten feeder schools mainly located in Northern Johannesburg suburbs. ***The subordinate tier*** consists of universities historically established and reserved for blacks, poorly resourced and mainly located in rural communities. Bush University belongs to this category. It is a grossly under resourced former blacks-only university located in one of South Africa's rural provinces. Bush University is almost exclusively black and working class , with data from the department of higher education and training (DHET) indicating that over 80% of its student population is eligible for financial aid. Established during the post-apartheid democratic dispensation, ***the intermediate/merger tier*** is an outcome of the merging of some HWIs and HBIs by the democratic government (DHET, 2010). Merger University belong to this category. It is also a well-endowed former whites-only Afrikaans speaking university that merged with a predominately black Technikon in post-apartheid South Africa, also located in a big city. Merger University consist of a similar student demographic profile as Ivory Tower University, with a slightly larger component of working-class. A sample that cuts across these three categories of institutions got me closer to participants' interestingly shared and varied experiences across the different universities. In the same spirit, students to be interviewed were selected from across different fields of study and gender (Quinn et al, 2005).

A sample of participants' biographical information Sheet is attached under appendices.

Narrative Interviewing

Here I wish to emphasize from the onset that, drawing from a social constructionist approach to interviews, my approach to interviewing was more of a social encounter and less of an interviewer-interviewee setting. Although, for the most part, I reduced myself to nodding and allowed participants tell their stories freely with hardly any interruption, my role as the researcher is just as important as that of the participant in the construction and communication of participants' stories. My goal was to gather narrative accounts that contribute towards an improved understanding of participants' common and divergent experiences of working-class completion and non-completion at different HEIs (Creswell, 2007).

The invitation Process

Participants were invited to take part in the study following ethics approval by the University of Bath and the three South African institutions from which data was collected **(see Appendix B).** The identification of participants was greatly aided by my familiarity with the South African higher education landscape.

Once I had identified potential participants, I then sent an invitations to potential participants. The invitation introduced myself as a doctoral student at the University of Bath, the purpose of my study, why I had selected the participant and the potential length of the interview. I immediately disclosed my intention to record the interview and reassured the participant of the confidential nature of the interview and that the identity of the participants would be strictly anonymized throughout the research process and in the final report. I also emphasized that participation was strictly voluntary with no reward attached to it. On the invitation I included a brief consent form for consenting to participate in the study and for the interview to be recoded.

On the invitation, I attached proof of ethics approval and my contact details.

The Interview Guide and Process

The design and implementation of my interview schedule was informed by my study's objectives, research questions, methodology and Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

I developed two interview guides, one for student participants and the other for key members of the higher education community in South Africa (i.e. university managers, policymakers, student leaders, academic and support staff) (see appendix C & D). The structure of the interview process with student participants followed a life story interview guide approach (Atkinson, 2002), with a particular interest in three phases of their life story: *Origins and family background experiences, pathways enroute higher education and students' higher education experiences.* Interviews with the rest of participants focused on their experiences and perceptions of prevalent completion and non-completion experiences amongst working-class students' in South African higher education.

My interview schedule had three major sections: *opening, body and closing.*

The opening section primarily aimed at establishing rapport (Atkinson, 2002) i.e. making participants feel welcomed, comfortable and relaxed. This was the most important part of the whole interview given that life story interviews are a deeply personal exercise. To achieve this, I began by politely introducing myself to the participant with my full name, where I am from, name of my university and repeating the objective and significance of the study, and the reasons why I had selected the participant to be part of the research project. Where possible, at this stage, I used participants' home language and found this to help participants relax (Atkinson, 2002).

The body section of the interview dealt with the main narration. I began with a quick demographic profiling of the participant. This enabled me to gain a sense of students' capital profile and dispositions towards education during their early and formative years. I then solicited an uninterrupted general outline of the participant's life story from early life to present moment. Naturally participants placed their family background, educational experiences, pathway to higher education and overall higher education experience which either had a happy (graduation) or sad ending (dropout) in a sequence of events. In the general outline of their life story, uninterrupted, participants summarized important chapters of their life story, episodes that remained memorable, their highs, lows and turning points, as well as roles played by significant people or institutions in enabling or hindering their educational progress. Importantly, I reduced myself to active listening and non-verbal feedback such as nodding to encourage a detailed narration. While listening I jotted down key moments and events for further prompting and probing once the participant is done narrating. Once the participant is done, I gently asked if he or she would like to add anything before gently transitioning to the next section of the interview. For clarity and context, I asked elaborations and clarifications once the respondent is done narrating (McAdams, 1995).

I then probed critical events in their life stories with a specific focus on the pre-university experience, pathways en route higher education and their higher education experience and its ending. At this stage I sought to explore how participants narrate the relationship between their family/community background, higher education aspirations, motivations and choices. *The Ending*: this was followed by probes around the overall higher education experiences i.e. from transition to happy or sad ending. The interview schedule for non-student participants (e.g. academic staff) focussed on their perceptions and experience of working-class students from their arrival on campus until completion or non-completion.

All interviews were recoded and transcribed with the help of a professional transcribing company. Where participants used their indigenous language, I transcribed the interview recordings myself. The average duration of the interview was one hour and thirty minutes. All recordings and transcribed transcripts were kept safe with multiple backups.

4.6.3 Narrative Analysis

Souto-Manning (2014) insisted that if "we are to engage in positive social change, we must start by listening to and analysing the everyday stories people tell" (p. 177). That is what my study I sought to achieve.

The analysis process was guided by the following questions:

- *How do working class students narrate their experiences of completion and non-completion at different South African Universities?*

- *How do key stakeholders in the South African higher education construct working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at different HEIs?*

Secondly, participants' narrative accounts of working-class completion and non-completion in South African HEIs were then thematically analyzed, guided by Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field, in order to answer the main research question:

- *What are the strengths and limitations of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction in aiding an improved understanding of factors potentially contributing to the low completion rates and high dropout rates of undergraduate financial aid students at different universities in South Africa?*

And lastly:

- *What lessons can be drawn from participants' narrative accounts in relation to efforts aimed at transforming the experience of working-class students in South African higher education?*

A thematic approach narrative analysis

Riessman (2005, p. 11) described narrative analysis as "a family of approaches to diverse kinds of texts, which have in common a storied form. What makes such diverse texts 'narrative' is sequence and consequence: events are selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience". Narrative inquiry is more than just methodology, it is a paradigm that represent storied ways of knowing and communicating (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997). Narrative analysis offers us an alternative to traditional positivist modes of knowing and communicating (Riesman, 2005). In this section I outline how participants' narrative accounts were analyzed in this study.

Firstly, there is no one way of conducting narratives analysis (Riessman, 2008). According to Chase (2011, p. 421) narrative inquiry is not only increasingly applied in multiple ways, it is an "evolving field in the making". Researchers can adopt a thematic, structural, interactional, or performative approach to analysis. In other words, a narrative inquirer can either focus on *what* participants said or *how* they said what they said or both. My study adopts a thematic approach to narrative analysis and focuses on *what* is said by different participants. I made this choice in order to stay close to participants' voice through the use of illustrative excerpts.

Secondly , drawing from Riessman's (2008) guidelines on thematic approach to narrative studies, I made the following important choices: a), in examining students' life stories I considered their whole story , not segments of their stories; b), each story and its significance to the research question was considered individually before extrapolating that which stood out at each phase of the student's life story; c), the themes reported did not simply 'emerge' out of participants' narrative accounts (Braun and Clarke, 2006), they are an outcome of my analytical decisions after the multiple interactions I had with participants' transcripts guided by priori theories .i.e. Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field and narrative inquiry's tools of analysis ; d), a key distinguishing feature of narrative investigators is their attention to time (temporality) and place, which enables us to locate and represent participants' narratives according to their social, cultural and historic frame and sequence. Consequently, and without losing the significance of each individual story, I organised working-class students' narrative accounts according to the three pre-determined phases in their journeys to and through higher education: *origins and family background; pathways en route higher education and their overall higher education experience.* This enabled me, as seen in the results chapters, to highlight what I find to be key dimensions of working-class students' students of experiences completion and non-completion through the eyes of participants across the three HEIs under study (Riessman, 2005; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

I kept the interview questions broad in line with narrative inquiry approaches to interviewing. My analysis process sought answers to the questions: how working-class students in this study narrate their experiences of completion and non-completion at different? How do key higher education stakeholders at different HEIs in South Africa construct working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion? What about working-class students is said to hinder or enable their successful completion in South African higher education? What about South African HEIs is said to hinder or enable working-class students' odds of completion? These questions, Bourdieu's theoretical constructs (field, capital and habitus) and a thematic approach to narrative analysis became the broad lens through which I considered data from participants' interviews. In the concluding chapter I examine the extent to which Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of capital, habitus and field can aid an improved understanding of disparities in completion amongst financial aid funded-working-class students in South African higher education.

Semantic level of analysis

I followed the Braun and Clarke (2006) step by step guide to doing thematic analysis which includes reading and re-reading the transcripts multiple times in order to familiarize myself with the data; generating initial codes; collating the data and searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and then producing a report.

I first read and re-read the transcripts horizontally, during which I noticed that how participants talked about working class failure and success in higher education followed a beginning, middle and ending pattern. Their narratives could be categorized into three phases of working-class students' journeys to and through higher education: *(1) Origins and Family Background, (2) Pathways En Route Higher Education and (3) their higher education experience*. These were my priori overarching themes. I then re-read the transcripts vertically and found that each transcript contained unique narratives and experiences that illuminated key dimensions of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education. Simultaneously, I also combed through participants' transcripts looking for the effects of capital, habitus and field on working-class students' experiences of higher education. This stage of analysis resulted in blocks of texts collated from each participant in relation to each of the three priori overarching themes.

Our individual stories do not exist in isolation, they have a social, cultural and even institutional dimension to it. Although narrative accounts commence with an individual's lived experience, narrative inquiry explores "the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p.42). In this study, through careful and multiple reading of participants' interview transcripts , i looked for evidence of the contribution and impact of students' origins and family background (cultural capital), their habituses and the higher education institution on NSFAS funded working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at different South African universities.

What sets narrative inquiry studies like mine apart from other forms of qualitative research is that we are less concerned with themes prevalent across interviews and more concerned with the individual voices found in narrative accounts. In this study participants' narratives ran into hundreds of pages when transcribed, which made it impossible for me to include every

participating student's story in this thesis. Guided by the research questions, I selected narrative accounts in which participant voices elucidate what I found to be key dimensions of NSFAS funded working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at different South African universities. With regard to participating students, the life stories of 5 working class graduates and 5 working class dropouts were selected for inclusion after examining all narrative accounts for common and unique themes across the three different universities: Bush University, Ivory Tower University and Merger University.

I also paid particular attention to narratives that diverge from established 'truths' about working-class students' experiences in higher education. According to (Riessman, 2008, p.186) "stories that … diverge from established "truth" can sometimes be the most interesting, indicating silenced voices and subjugated knowledge". Using excerpts from transcripts I sought to stay as close to participants' voice as possible. Having had to narrow down the number of participants whose stories I could fit into this thesis, and in order to honour the uniqueness of participants' stories, I chose to a combination of vertical and horizontal representation of the data.

My results chapters attempt to reconstruct a timeline of key dimensions of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education through the eyes of working-class graduates and dropouts, university managers, student leaders, policy makers, academic and support staff. The analysis chapters illuminate that which stands out from participants' narrative accounts at each of the three pre-determined phases of working-class students' journeys to and through higher education: (1) Origins and Family Background, (2) Pathways En Route Higher Education and (3) their higher education experience. I used NVivo software to code the interviews according to these three overarching themes.

4.7 Ethical Considerations and Data Management

Ethical considerations are a fundamental aspect of any research project. Silverman (2006) cautioned that studies that do not pay due attention to values and ethics may infringe on participants' rights and compromise the quality and validity of the research project. Cohen et al (2000) outlines beneficence, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity as key ethical principles that we as researchers ought to adhere to. Narrative studies require strict adherence to these ethical principles given the sensitivity of handling participants' life stories (Silverman, 2006).

Every participant was assured that participating or withdrawing from the study would neither benefit nor disadvantage them in any way. Participants completed and signed a consent form which reassured them about the confidential and anonymous nature of their participation in the study (see appendix). To achieve this all audio and transcribed interviews were stored safely and strictly anonymized.

In this study, I strictly abide by these ethical principles and the research integrity and ethics guidelines as outlined in the University of Bath's Code of Good Practice in Research Integrity. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Bath's ethic committee as well as the three South African universities under study.

Given my recent history as President of the Student Union at Ivory Tower University and Chairman of large NPO that assist working class youth to access and succeed in South African higher education , some of the participants were familiar with me and at times took for granted that I understood the topic under study. Some participants often started responses with words like "you would know better than me that South African universities ….". I often had to encourage participants to speak freely as though I knew very little about the South African higher education experience. I was open and honest and treated them with respect, which in turn seemed to make them speak freely about their life stories.

Narratives are deeply personal and conducting research on people's sensitive experiences raises a number of ethical issues (Draucker, 2009). In this study, a number of students divulged deeply hurtful and traumatic experiences to me. They range from loss of parents to experiences of sexual harassment. During these interviews, I had to pause and express my sympathy and understanding of the distress that such experiences have caused in their lives. I expressed my sincere understanding and appreciation of the life stories by also expressing similar experiences that I went through myself, including losing a parent. Although participants expressed comfort and willingness to continue with the interview, I remained mindful of the sensitive nature of their stories throughout the interview and went an extra mile to protect and respect their life story and identity (Draucker, 2009).

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlined my study's methodological choices, influences and justifications. A narrative approach was applied to explore working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at three different South African universities. In-depth narrative interviews with open-ended questions were used to collect insights on participants' lived experiences and their overall perspectives on the prevalence of high non-completion and very low completion rates amongst financial aid funded working class students at different South African HEIs. A total of forty-six narrative interviews were conducted with twenty-six working class graduates and dropouts and twenty-two university managers, policy makers, members of academic and support staff at the three different universities. The average duration of the interviews was one hour and thirty minutes. Purposefully selected narrative accounts were analyzed through a combination of Bourdieu's theoretical constructs (field, capital and habitus) and a thematic approach to narrative analysis. The primary focus in this study is not so much on recurrent themes across interviews, but rather how participants' narratives elucidate and illuminate key dimensions of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at different South African HEIs.

The following empirical chapters present an analysis of key dimensions of working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education through the eyes of working-class graduates, working class dropouts and key members the South African higher education community.

Chapter 5: Working-Class Graduates' Narrative Accounts Of Completion In HE

5.1 Introduction

There is a general deficit view of working-class students in higher education (Crozier and Reay, 2011). Specifically, the effect of working-class social and cultural origins is mostly theorized through reproductive and deficit lens, as a constraint to their overall higher education experience and outcomes. Working-class graduates are largely considered, by both institutions and individuals, an exception to the dropout norm (Arbouin, 2018). This subordination has, in turn, made working-class students in higher education prone to feel inadequate, illegitimate, and to view failure as inevitable (Mallman, 2017). Mallman (2017, p. 325) adopts the legal term "*inherent vice*, describe a process in which individuals and institutions are disposed to viewing lower levels of cultural capital in working-class students as an indication of their 'natural' inferiority, rather than as disadvantages of inheritable, symbolic resources".

The deficit outlook on the working-class has perpetuated a tendency in higher education studies to treat working-class students as a group that has little to offer and that must somehow be supported and 'cured' of the working-class attributes that hinder their educational experiences and odds of success. As a result, the solution to weak higher education attainment amongst working class students has been sought from everywhere else but this group of students. In contrast, studies on successful working-class experiences in education by Yosso (2005), Crozier & Reay (2011), Mills (2008), Arbouin (2018) and others, have illuminated the often overlooked resourceful and transformative side working class students in higher education. This line of inquiry has caught my attention too.

Although they remain a minority in South Africa higher education throughput rates (DHET, 2019), the experiences of working-class graduates remain an interesting and potentially transformative area of inquiry (Mills, 2008). How do working class graduates narrate their experiences of completion at different South African universities? How can their narrative accounts deepen our understanding of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education? And within the context of efforts to transform and widen participation in higher education, answers to these questions present opportunities for transformation and to deepen our understanding of the challenge of student attrition.

This chapter reports on narrative accounts of five purposefully selected working-class graduates from Ivory Tower University, Merger University and Bush University. Ivory Tower University is a well-endowed former whites-only elite English university located in the central business district of Johannesburg. Merger University is a well-endowed former whites-only Afrikaans speaking university that merged with a predominately black Technikon in post-apartheid South Africa, also located in the Johannesburg. Bush University is a grossly under resourced former blacks-only university located rural Limpopo province. Ivory Tower University is racially diverse but predominantly middle and upper class with its top ten feeder schools mainly located in Northern Johannesburg suburbs. Merger University follows a similar demographic profile with a slightly larger component of working-class students than Ivory Tower University. Bush University is predominantly black and working class with over 80% of its student population coming from poor and working-class households (DHET, 2019).

Participants' life stories have been organized chronologically to follow their origin and family backgrounds (formative years), pathways en route higher education and their higher education experiences and outcomes. This chapter looks at how these phases are woven throughout these working-class graduates' life stories. Graduates' enabling and disabling factors are categorised under positive and negative dimensions respectively.

5.2 THABANG'S STORY

5.2.1 Origins and Family Background

Thabang is on the final stages of his Master of Arts at Ivory Tower University, one of the highly selective and elite Universities in South Africa. He also completed his undergraduate degree in Psychology at the same university. He was born 27 years ago in the crime ridden and poverty-stricken Alexandra Township, one of the largest informal settlements and apartheid era cheap labour reserve situated just outside of Johannesburg. Only a highway separates Alexandra from the Sandton Business District of Johannesburg, popularly known as "the richest square mile in Africa".

Thabang's life story gets off to a "traumatic" start in Alexandra Township, with a critical event and a particularly "nadir experience"/low point that goes on to fundamentally influence his life story and educational experience:

> *THABANG: My story starts there in like a very traumatic way. It starts with me on my mom's back and I falling off after she was stabbed…My mother died when I was one year and six months old, I don't know my father.*

Orphaned, Thabang moved to rural Limpopo Province where he lived with his grandmother.

Thabang traces his humble beginnings to his grandmother's rural home where his life began to shape up. He described his family background to paint a picture of disrupted and survivalist family circumstances. His family scrape the bottom of the barrel in order to get by. Despite the challenging family circumstances, Thabang recalled with pride the enabling and habituating role played by his grandmother , who not only softened the blow of his humble and turbulent beginnings but also set him on a persistent and aspirational path.

> *THABANG So, where I stayed there was a ground. And what my gran did, she will dig the ground and then separate the soil from the rocks and then sell the rocks as concrete to the trucks. It was small stones. And then you pile them up and then sell it to the truck…And then another thing, you see these guys that are walking on the street with tins and cans and things like that? So, we will sit down, collect them and crush them put them inside bag and then sell those and recycle.*
>
> *MUKOVHE: Sure*
>
> *THABANG: So, from there I think that in itself already influenced my attitude towards a lot of things… growing up with my gran also , who was a very strong woman, one of the things that obviously come to mind is that she always used to, I'm going to say it in Peddie that I can relate to it better …,*
>
> *MUKOVHE: Sure*
>
> *THABANG: She {grandmother} always used to say [in Sepedi, one of South Africa's official languages] "who will you cry to?", which has been very profound, I mean even now in my life to say like*

really, who are you going to cry at? Who is going to be there for you to cry? So, then this, in a lot of ways , gave me an impression that you need to, complaining doesn't help, what is it that is there that one can do at that time to make things a little more comfortable, to make things a little bit better, to chase one's dream as a goal?

5.2.2 Pathway Enroute Higher Education

i. Schooling Experiences

Thabang completed his primary and secondary schooling at his grandmother's village home in rural Limpopo Province after relocating from Alexandra Township where his mother was tragically murdered. Although he attended at typical rural, under resourced and overcrowded public school with classrooms of *"between 60 and 70 learners"* , Thabang identified his under-resourced origins and schooling experiences as a positive breeding ground for the resilience and the improvisation that he believes later enabled him to successfully navigate a grossly under resourced start to his educational journey.

With regard to his schooling experiences, despite the lack of resources both at home and school, Thabang was still "*very into it"* … to an extent that he *"was one of the kids in class that was very loved by teachers"* and this he believes *"facilitated this process of me getting to Ivory Tower University".* Thabang narrates how his school principal *enabled him to* defy the impact of his under resourced origins and schooling, and instead infused transformative *currency* into both his portfolio of cultural capital and habitus. He recounts:

THABANG: So, from the moment I was going to school, I mean I was going to school, I didn't have shoes on, I was going to school, I didn't have lunch box, I never had in both high school and primary school, I never went to any trips, only like, you know every year there's trips at school….So, but through all that I was going to, my school bag was a plastic bag, Checkers plastic bag. I will hook it around my arms, and I will run to school and I'd be fine. And from there, that process, learning in itself, I started engaging with it, even though there was no resources, there was no proper education system, our teachers themselves were not so excited themselves about what they were doing when they engaged with you. They didn't have resources themselves but from there I was very into it. Like I remember I was one of the kids in class that was very loved by teachers, so that I think facilitated this process of me getting to Ivory Tower University.

The Principal I think is the, his attitude towards studying, he was the one that kind of kept me going, even here at Ivory Tower University. This principal, he was very serious about his business. I mean like you see the things that he was doing, even though at the time he was preparing us up like crazy, now you look at how that has actually shaped my attitude towards what I do. And I think he really played his role.

ii. Higher Education Aspirations : Paved with Stepping Stones and Agents of Transformation

Thabang was the first in his family to attend university. He says this is consistent with the low higher education participation rate in his community where *"university students are so rare they are like something that comes out of a lucky packet"*. He grew up with two sisters, none of whom went to university. *"The oldest finished matric, my, the one before me finished matric and then the one before that finished at grade ten, yes"*. He adds: *"University for them (his family) , me to go to any University was out of reality for my family"*.

En route higher education, Thabang encountered *three people who became his stepping stones* and helped pave his pathway to higher education. The impact of these individuals on Thabang's educational journey and his identity as a student is apparent in how he narrates his path from humble beginnings to gaining admission to the highly selective and elite Ivory Tower University , and the role played by three people: Mrs Sue (a former teacher who runs an orphanage Thabang visited) , his Grandmother and one Admission Officer at Ivory Tower University.

The first key stepping stone, Mrs Sue, is a former teacher who ran an *the orphanage* Thabang was "lucky" to have access to whilst at school.

…I think I was very lucky that I had access to this orphan centre place because even though a lot of kids were very embarrassed by this place, I wasn't, I continued going. People were making fun of me when I was growing up and saying things like "you're eating rotten food, you are eating expiry food" and all these things, but for some reason, I won't tell you what reasons, I kept on going. You know? I think there was something to benefit from all the time. To be able to be there, the older people, not being there, the family and relatives also motivated me to go there more, having access to food and just having access to an environment that is not very punitive, I guess.

Thabang talks of this "amazing lady" … "Mrs Sue" … who , after realising the struggles of children without parents , quit her job as a teacher to start an orphan centre respond to the needs of orphans in the community.

> *THABANG: She (Mrs Sue) believed in me. She still believes in me today. Even though at times when the situation was hectic, she never once, I've never doubted her belief in me from the moment I met her. So, that in itself, that environment in itself, that was why I was able to then nurture me into the person I've become. To a point where she said "Thabiso, what's the plan after you pass matric? She called me, I was in Alexandra at the time, she was like "what is the plan? You have passed, you have passed really well, I think you need to do something. I know we don't have funds, we have nothing, but we can just see what we can do, what you can study, what are you interested in?". It {choice of field of study} was one of the things I never considered. Even though I enjoyed drawing and I enjoyed, one of the things I can go into is architecture, I never for once considered really, what do I really want to do? What do I want to pursue? The lack of exposure and all those things, it didn't make it easier.*

The second person to pave Thabang's path to higher education is his grandmother. She was one his *"stepping Stone"* en route higher education. Although Thabang's "illiterate" grandmother could not offer him idealised and valued capitals en route higher education, she did however manage to impart on him, according to Thabang, what became strategic tools and dispositions to understand and accumulate such 'idealised capitals' by himself in a manner that enabled him to *trade* his way into higher education institution. Thabang explains how this occurred:

> *THABANG: So, yes, one of the things that my gran taught me, which I think is the one thing that maybe saved me through all this long, she taught me to be very humble. To humble myself as best as I can. So, everyone that I meet must never ever feel threatened. So, that has, I guess that in itself is a thing that has allowed me to meet people who are willing to give a hand….So, and this is a thing that has continued, I think it has continued throughout my life. Today the people that I meet, the way I approach people and things like that, and that one I put specifically to my grandmother. She is a, yes, she was, she really took, she left her life in Alexandra, she put down everything and left Alexandra so that I can grow up to be the person that I am today. So, when you're talking about* ***attitude****, that's the person that comes to mind.*

The third key stepping stone to pave Thabang's path to higher education was an admission officer at Ivory Tower University. Due to lack of funding, information, technology and career guidance,

working class students living in Thabang's village either do not consider or are unable to apply and gain admission in higher education. This trend is particularly visible during the annual long lines of late applicants that form around higher education institutions at the beginning of each academic year in almost every South African university. Thabang was no exception, he also had to complete a *"late application form"* at the beginning of his first year of study at Ivory Tower University. Despite having not applied to any institution for enrollment on time, Thabang good school leaving results were noticed by an admission officer who then assisted him to apply and gain admitted at the elite and highly selective Ivory Tower University.

iii. Higher Education Choices

With regard to his choice of university, Thabang only chose Ivory Tower University where he hoped to be near his sister who lived Alexandra, a township located 16 Kilometres away from the University.

With regard to his choice of field of study, Thabang initially *"wanted to study Architecture but the marks (grades) didn't allow me"*. Having failed to meet Architecture's admission requirements, he then settled for his second choice which was a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. His interest in Psychology as a field of study was stimulated during the time when he used to visit the orphanage whilst in high school. "At the orphanage we all didn't have parents. The Psychologist who used to visit the orphanage is the one who made me pick psychology".

5.2.3 The Higher Education Experience

Negative dimensions of Thabang's higher education experience:

i. Higher Education Transition: A Hard Landing on Campus

Become a Registered Student, we'll figure out the rest along the way

Thabang experienced a hard landing upon arrival at Ivory Tower University. He tells a story of how working-classness and his lack of idealised capital derailed his transition phase in higher education. A number of factors contributed to Thabang's hard landing at Ivory Tower University:

Firstly, upon arrival, Thabang lacked the required economic *capital* to pay for registration at the beginning of the academic year at Ivory Tower University. By this time, he had no knowledge of how to access NSFAS's funding for working class students. The funding challenges he experienced during the transition phase adversely affected both his academic and social integration into the university. He spent the first six months at the university relying on freely distributed promotional stationery in order to take notes in class.

> THABANG: *The problem comes now, registration. What was it, R6 500? So, now it was like okay, what do you do? I talked to the orphanage, using the money that I had saved from social grant was not a good idea because if I use that money then there's nothing, I can't go to school. So, then the orphanage, on the last day of registration, comes up with the money, they sent me the money to register. We don't know how I'm going to pay for {tuition} fees, I don't know how I'm going to pay for my textbooks, we don't know anything. Okay cool. Then I was lucky enough, during O week there's those promotional things, so Standard Bank was handing out small books, small notebooks, these small ones like this one.*
>
> MUKOVHE: *Yes, like a note book yes.*
>
> THABANG: *Yes. The first six months that's where I was writing my notes, in that small book.*

Consequently**,** Thabang had to be savvy with the little money received from social grant for orphans and the random contributions he received from the orphanage back in his village. He prioritised spending money on getting to and from the university. For him:

> THABANG: *"the most important thing was for me to be here {University}. If I can have money to get here and I'm guaranteed that this money is going to last me this long, I should never touch it, I should just come to school. Once in a while the orphanage was able to send me R300, R200, because they still had the children they were looking after in Limpopo".*

ii. Student Housing Crisis and Homelessness: "When I'm in the library there's no switching off of lights"

The second factor that contributed to Thabang's hard landing at Ivory Tower University was the student housing shortage and homelessness, persistent challenge in South African Higher Education. Barely two months into his first academic year at Ivory Tower University, pushed by lack of transport money and an overcrowded home, Thabang *"moved to the library"*. His narration of living conditions that led to him sleeping in the university's library not only illustrate how his humble origins follows him into higher education, but further highlight the severity with which the student housing shortages affect the most vulnerable students during the critical phase of transition.

> *THABANG: Okay cool…. March, that's when I moved to the library here. So, in Alexandra {home} I'm staying in a one-room house. In this one-room house it's me, it's my uncle, it's my sister, it's my aunt. My sister has a child…it was very difficult to study. I couldn't study a lot of times because studying meant that I had to have a light on and then if I have the light on it means I'm disturbing people that have to sleep here. Okay so that was one of the reasons that made me be very motivated to move into the library because when I'm in the library there's no switching off of lights or things like that, I can be in the library, I can use the textbooks in the library and then I'll be okay, then I don't need to buy a textbook which I don't have.*

Quite markedly, Thabang's ability to improvise, adapt and persist under unpleasant conditions is once again visible at this key moment. Ordinarily, the experience of a working class student resorting to sleeping in the library building due to funding challenges should be reported exclusively as a "nadir moment" in the student's experience. At least this was my initial feeling when I recorded Thabang's experience. Indeed, Thabang does identify this moment as a challenging one. However, he recalls a positive twist to it. Whilst acknowledging it as a challenging period, Thabang also identified this moment as a positive turning point in his experience in higher education and journey to completion. When I asked him to identify a turning point during this phase of his life story, Thabang explained:

> *THABANG: The one thing that I always think about is when I decided to go to sleep in the library. So, what I decided was I was going to go {to the university} on Monday and I'll come back {home} on Friday. That is how I started sleeping in the library. So, I know I'm guaranteed that I will not miss out on anything because I was not in class. Because that will make me feel worse about my life because I'm not doing anything. So, I think that for me is a very important time in my life, that, it kind of created a ripple effect into everything else that came after that.*

iii. The ever-lingering threat of "exclusion"

Three months into the academic year, Thabang began to feel the institution's ever lingering threat to "exclude" him because of outstanding tuition fee. By this time, due to lack of relevant and timely information about funding opportunities, Thabang had not applied for the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) loans.

> *THABANG: End of April, that's when I started getting e-mails from the University, so "you're facing financial exclusion", to say "we are approaching the second part of the year and you have not paid anything towards your studies and that is not good". All this pressure from the university now adding on. To make it worse, they even send you like mails, letters. So, every time I go to Alexandra {home}, I find a letter. Every time I'm here, I'm getting e-mails. So, okay, I continued with that, the orphanage tried, they tried what they could, but it didn't happen.*

iv. Weak faculty-student relations

Thabang was *"for some reason… confident to walk in"* and confide in and seek help from his Philosophy professor. Thabang found the professor to be out of touch with his working-class reality. Instead of receiving guidance, Thabang's interaction with this particular professor only widened the trust deficit between him and the academic staff. To him the professor appeared aloof and detached from working class realities Ivory Tower University.

> *THABANG: I tell him my situation and I'm struggling, and he said to me that, I wish I could see that man today, he said "you know what, you're doing well, just keep on pushing". This time I'm telling you that I've not eaten, I don't have a place to stay, I'm failing. My fees are not paid. This is what I was telling him and what he says is that "you are doing well", in philosophy for*

whatever reason he's thinking that, "just keep on pushing". I was very angry after this session because it didn't make sense to me. How do you expect me to continue and this?

Positive Dimensions of Thabang's Higher Education Experience:

i. Perseverance - "Giving up not an option"

An academically devastating end to the first semester at Ivory Tower University marks a "turning point" in Thabang's higher education experience. By the end of his first semester, Thabang had failed three of the four registered modules, a significant drop from his school leaving academic results that were good enough to enrol him at a highly selective institution of higher learning.

> THABANG: *So, I failed the rest and I only passed one. This was when I had to sit down and rethink my whole approach. Rethink everything of what I'm going to do… so, I had three options actually, it was either I go back to Limpopo and live the life that I could, that I know, go back to Alexandra, Alexandra I didn't like and it made me feel very uncomfortable, merely because my mom died there and she died because they stabbed her. So, that was not an option… Then to go to Limpopo {Grandmother's rural home} also was not an option because then it meant that I was giving up in the process.*

Having declared that *"giving up was not an option",* Thabang recalls his "*belief*" that education *"was the only way out"* of his humble beginnings was a key factor in his decision to persist in higher education. With only this belief at his disposal, Thabang walked around campus *"looking for someone to talk to"*. At first, things didn't go very well for him. Despite his determination to seek help, a limited language capital held him back as self-doubt and discomfort around communicating in English limited the options of where he could seek help. He explains:

> THABANG *:So, I got to my department's building that day and I walked around, I'm looking for someone to talk to at that time…I didn't find anyone that I was comfortable talking to at that time and I was still thinking of myself as stupid and you don't know English, so how are you going to talk to these people? I am looking for someone to talk to.*

ii. Capital Accumulation: "my life changed after I said my name"

Despite a rough first semester of homelessness, poor academic performance and aloof academic staff, Thabang persisted *"looking for someone to speak to"* during his second semester until he found someone who fits Mills's (2008) description of an agent of transformation. After his disappointing encounter with his philosophy professor, Thabang decided to "set up an email" and write down his story of hardships at Ivory Tower University and send it Course Coordinator at his Psychology Department. Thabang identified his encounter with the Course Coordinator as a turning point in at Ivory Tower University. He explains how this occurred:

> *THABANG: …the e-mail that I was typing took me two nights because I was very uncomfortable with my language, English specifically, so I had to edit and all this…I don't know who I'm sending it to at this time, it happens to be Mrs Ingrid, the person who I'm sending it to. The following morning, I get a reply early in the morning saying, "come and see me, we need to change this" … So, I go around the building and I find the office. It's this white middle class, lady, old lady. It took me about a week to go and see her… I was very scared to walk in and she was like, "are you looking for me?" She always has students in her office. "Are you looking for me?" Yes, I'm looking for you. "What is your name?" My name is Thabang. My life changed after I said my name.*

Thabang's encounter with Mrs Ingrid was a turning point in his life story in that it enabled him to navigate the field of higher education in a number of ways:

First, Mrs Ingrid enabled Thabang to acquire the necessary resources and support for his head to remain above water after a devastating first semester:

> *THABANG: It was the first time at Wits I ever got a textbook, It was the first time in my life I ever got a memory stick, I got all the notes of psychology, she linked me up with other lecturers of the modules I was doing and they were able to facilitate me.*

Secondly, Mrs Ingrid offered Thabang a place to stay:

> *THABANG: It was too much; it was too real. I didn't expect that one will then make it {his situation} like their own issue. I stayed with her for about a month or a month and a half, I stayed with her at the house, that's when I then got that room at men's hall of residence . All this time my family knows nothing of where I am, they think that I'm at school, they don't know that I was sleeping in the library the whole time, they don't know that I failed some modules. University for them, what I was studying was not a real, me to go to any University was out of reality for my family.*

Thirdly, living with Mrs Ingrid not only enabled Thabang to accumulate idealised and rewarded capitals at Ivory Tower University, but further boost his ability to aspire and navigate in a field of higher education that , he feels, remains hostile and violent to his kind. He does this through a process of accumulating additional capitals, converting his existing portfolio of capital into the recognised and rewarded currency and trading towards successful completion of his undergraduate degree. In their study of children of low-educated immigrants Maurice et al (2017) introduced the term "multiplier effect" to explain this process whereby working-class youth accumulate additional capitals in manner that multiplies their chances of success.

Thabang's chances of completion multiplied not only when he was exposed to idealised and rewarded capitals whilst staying with Mrs Ingrid , but through a combination of his working class community cultural wealth of capitals, his aspirational habitus and exposure to an enabling environment. For example, while at Mrs Ingrid's house, Thabang improved his English proficiency and pronunciation by listening and observing lip movement during conversations. The improvement in his English proficiency not only improved his academic engagement in the classroom but further earned him access to new social circles, thereby filling up his portfolio of social capital. Additionally, improved English proficiency gave a boost to Thabang's confidence in and outside of the classroom which, according to him, improved his academic engagement. He explains this how this process occurred:

> *THABANG: So, during study breaks, during holidays I will go and visit them (Mrs Ingrid's office) for a week or two and then I'll go home. They will take me with on holidays. So, that environment also, which is also one of the things that led to me doing so well, English was not a threat to me anymore. English now was just a language that people use. I was able to learn the language a lot more because now I didn't have a choice, I couldn't use Peddie {his home language} , I can't run away and talk Peddie, the whole family speaks English, there's nothing I can do.*

So, that environment challenged my thinking in itself… to say you have to catch up now, which is why I did so well at the end of the year because now English was something exciting to learn, English was now, I don't know how to put it, but it was something I actually see myself, the possibility of actually of learning it. It wasn't me going to read a dictionary, it was no longer a threat.... So, looking at, like I was looking at small things, the mouth. Like when they were talking, I'd focus on the mouth and I'll look at how do they talk

So, that (improved command of English) also kind of encouraged me and developed me to be more confident in myself, to be more confident in the things that I want to do, to be more confident in my studies most importantly…through that I got to engage with people from a different context. It means that I even, my social capital increased in that I didn't only speak to poor people, I don't know if you get what I'm saying. Mrs Ingrid coming into my life was a very good thing also in itself, it created a ripple effect that translated into a very big thing. But most importantly because now, you know I tend to look at my family and say my family is quite small. But through this journey I've made such a huge family that has nothing to do with blood.

By the end of the year I was able to pass all my modules. But then to also make up for those that I failed in the first semester.

MUKOVHE: Sure, that is a big jump.

THABANG: That is a very big jump. So, from there things started getting better, I started also developing some confidence in myself.

iii. From Second year to completion: ***A Breeze!***

Thabang's university experience improved significantly from his second year onwards. His encounter with Mrs Ingrid during the second semester of his first year of study led to a number of transformative improvements during his second year of study. Firstly, he applied and secured funds from the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) which significantly reduced his funding related challenges. This meant he could focus more on his academic engagement and less

on barely surviving. In this case Ms Ingrid helped Thabang accumulate much needed economic capital.

Secondly, Thabang recounts experiencing a positive change in how he related with knowledge and the university during his second year of study as another transformative moment in his educational journey . To this extent, Thabang bought up a boost to his *"confidence",* being *"aware of the system*" and understanding *"how the university works"* as some of the key transformative changes on his journey to completion of his undergraduate programme at Ivory Tower University. Both his second and third year progressed smoothly, and he managed to complete his undergraduate degree on record time. He went on to successfully complete his fourth or honours year in psychology with four distinctions, paving his way into a Masters of Arts in psychology at the same institution.

Thirdly, by completing his undergraduate degree with distinctions, Thabang not only broke free from the dominant vicious cycle of non-completion amongst NSFAS funded working-class students in South African Universities , his educational journey illuminates both hindrances and enablers that working class students engage with at Ivory Tower University and South African HEIs in general.

In the excerpt below, Thabang highlights subtle dimensions of his higher education experiences that contributed to completion of his studies:

> *THABANG: In the first six months I didn't see, I didn't think I'd make it. But now even, like I started even gaining some weight, I was eating proper, I was eating three meals a day instead of a Chelsea bun the whole day. Then I went into second year more confident, more able to read, spending most of my time in the library. What I decided to do, I think from the beginning when I got here, I decided I wasn't going to be part of the glamour, like parties and all of these things, I made a conscious decision, but it was quite easy because I made it way before when I was still a small boy. Through that I then became aware of the system, if I can put it that way, how university works, how things functions in this context. From there things were a little bit easier. It made me more comfortable with submissions, becoming more, I mean the first time I said something in class was the end of third year. I was more engaging, I was trusting of my opinions and I could own my opinions, whether they're right or wrong. I was more comfortable to own them, which I guess says a lot in terms of how I did in Honours things like that.*

Looking Back: Thabang's reflection on Ivory Tower University

i. Challenging the institutional habitus and pedagogy: "There was no other way, we needed to change the system"

After completing his undergraduate studies, Thabang spent a year volunteering with an NGO providing mental health interventions to vulnerable residents in Alexandra Township. A year later he enrolled for his Master of Arts in psychology at the same university. As he continued well into his masters degree, Thabang's student identity and relationship with Ivory Tower University evolved from that of a student with his head barely above water, to fiercely confronting the the ivory tower institutional habitus and pedagogy. Specifically, Thabang began to challenge what he perceived to be a "privileged" and "white" angle from which psychology was being taught and practised in his department.

I asked Thabang to look back at his experience at Ivory Tower University and reflect on the institution itself and what he perceived to be its role in working class experiences of completion and non-completion.

Thabang found *"engaging with the context of our department*" frustrating. He felt that the people teaching and practicing psychology in his department *"actually don't care"* about the realities of working class students. During his internship at the university, Thabang found the university's Career Counselling and Development Unit to have a "*very Eurocentric*" and "*very individualistic*" approach to psychology. He attributes this picture to the fact that "*the rest of the people I worked with came from very privileged spaces*". Thabang explains some of his frustrations with how psychology was being taught and practiced at Ivory Tower University:

> *THABANG: So, for a lot of students, because of me having my own experience, it was not a typical therapy that we have of today, it was not a textbook therapy, it was a therapy based on experience that actually life is shit. I'm not really proud of the things that I did not do that were very important. I feel like the institution itself did not understand mental health and how things such as poverty, socio economic resources {affect} health in itself, but now they want to just diagnose*

people with whatever. This person is not, does not need to be diagnosed, this person needs help. And what they need help with, and the first thing is food, give them food. So, how can you diagnose someone with bipolar when they're hungry? It doesn't make sense

I started asking myself what's the point for me doing this? Because my thesis specifically looks at why is it that psychologists are not working with people who don't have money? Why is it that psychologists are only, specifically psychologists that trained with a paradigm that has social justice in it? Why is it that these people are not actually working in a socially just way? And so, finding out that people are not working in a socially just way was not good for me, because then my hopes, my dreams about psychology, views about psychology was kind of lacking.

ii. Staying motivated despite being isolated and invisible

When I asked him to reflect on his source of motivation and persistence in higher education, Thabang identified multiple and evolving areas from which he drew strength to persist, all of which were underpinned by his resolve to disrupt the reproductive intergenerational transfer of educational disadvantage in his family and community.

THABANG: I mean my, after I had my first degree and we had a celebration in the community, the chief came, the queen came even, and seeing that and seeing the pride in people and seeing how other children from the orphanage themselves are now actually seeing like the importance of education, so that in itself has contributed to motivation.

Additionally, during his time at ivory Tower University, Thabang's motivation evolved towards the desire to transform the field of psychology and the manner in which it was being taught and practised at Ivory Tower University.

THABANG: And psychology itself, the lack of critical engagement in psychology, that in itself, that one became a threat, a weakness, I mean a motivation and a thing that also at the same time put me down. Because looking at the situation I got very despondent, I got very disheartened about it and it took me a while to get back to actually seeing that I need to make this change, I need to engage, I need to get myself to a position where I can influence the profession of psychology in South

Africa. So, that has, for the past, let's say for the two years after I finished my internship, for a year, two years after I finished by internship I was very down in terms of the field that I was a part of, just seeing actually what it is.

iii. "we have oversimplified poor people not doing well"

When the chance presented itself, I moved on to solicit Thabang's perception of potential factors behind the persistently high rate of dropout amongst working class students and specifically those funded by NSFAS in South African HEIs. In his response I wished to establish an understanding of Ivory Tower University's hand in working class experiences of completion and non-completion through the eyes of a working-class graduate. I also sought to benefit from his reflections beyond his personal lived experience and its happy ending.

Visibly enraged in his eyes, Thabang started by highlighting how working-class students come to develop a lack of sense of belonging and how this has negatively affected their academic engagement at Ivory Tower University. He singles out the distant and dismissive academic staff as a contributor to working class students feeling of being out of place at the institution.

> THABANG : *First and foremost, they (working-class students) don't think they belong here. A very important thing that needs to be addressed is that they actually don't think that they belong here. They don't think that this is the space for them. I mean if I had to think of myself, I did nothing, only after about third year did I become comfortable at Ivory Tower University. So, this was not my space.*

Secondly, he proceeds to stress how the University's "*way of teaching, the way of thinking*" is far removed from working class students' reality, which in turn, "*has very much removed a lot of students from the experience of learning*". Thabang found the University's way of life "*segregatory*" in that it expects working class students "*to know a life that they are not a part of*".

> THABANG : *Like for, like the way of teaching, the way of learning is very difficult for poor people because they're not a part of it. The reality of learning, they're not part of it. You get what I'm saying? So, what you first have to do, they have to learn the reality, that reality first before they can actually understand it because the more you can say a theory is a theory, a theory is not just a theory. A theory is context. A theory is life. I mean the simple things like counting is*

embedded within a specific way, a specific community that came up with that specific perspective of counting.

He further identified denialism on that part of the university as the root cause of a permanent mismatch between Ivory Tower University's institutional culture and the reality of working class students. For him, failure is not an outcome of working class students' lack of academic ability , the university is already highly in a manner that ensures that only the best are admitted into the university. He feels that it is rather the university's elitist way of life that is far removed from working-class realities:

THABANG: …someone will come from a high school in Limpopo (a rural and predominantly working class province), they were getting distinctions in maths, when they get here, they don't get it any more. Why? Are we saying that they lost it? Are we saying that they're stupid? Are we saying that? But the way of teaching, the way of describing reality here is very much away from poor people because it's a rich perspective of reality. And that's just my perception of it.

Thabang felt that Ivory Tower University conveys a message that a "*poor person's reality is stupid"* and is not recognised, and that one must first learn and assimilate into the university's status quo before one is visible and therefore recognised. Quite markedly, Thabang bemoans that neither are working class students even given enough time learn and appreciate the university's written and unwritten rules of the university game:

THABANG: So one then needs to, which is very unfortunate because it's not so easy to do, consciously see that (elitist reality) so that they can cope with it. And then if you don't see it, then what happens? Then you're going to be part of the stats that go home. It's a shock to them (working-class students) and what is that reality doing to them? Describing them as stupid? Continuously poor people are being described as being stupid because they're poor, nothing else, there is no other definition. It's because they don't have the exposure that their fellow {privileged} students have.

I mean like to be in a first classroom is freaking traumatic. First year classroom as a poor person , because you're looking at, you don't get to listen to the educator, you don't get to listen because you're still adjusting to the reality of your students, your fellow student mates. You're still adjusting to their reality to say shit, there's people with notebooks, there's people with pens, there's

people who can talk, there's people who, you get what I'm saying? And that's going to take you a good month if you are lucky. How do you not fail? And now when you're eighteen you're put into that environment that actually tells you that actually you thought you know life, but you don't know anything.

Thabang further argued that the discourse around widening participation in higher education is blinded by the elite and superficial lens through which the experiences of working class students is looked at. He believes the struggles of working class students are largely misunderstood because *"we have oversimplified poor people not doing well"*. As a result an opportunity to transform and maximize the purchasing power of the kinds of capitals and dispositions working-class students bring to higher education is missed by the dominant privileged lens.

THABANG: …we have oversimplified poor people not doing well. That is my personal opinion, we have oversimplified it. Poor people are not stupid, people are aware of very hectic dynamics that rich people are privileged enough not to think about. Do you get what I'm saying? Things that poor people get to think about, a rich person has never thought about, therefore they don't need to think about it, that's why we call them privileged. Because you are privileged enough not to have to think about things this way, therefore you never have to deal with it…the poor person's mind is overworking all the time, but then it cannot be seen as constructive by privileged people because for them, they never have to think that way, they never had to think about those things. So, when one complains, that's why people easily say something like "just get over it" and, because the truth is you've never had to think about it, it actually doesn't impact your life.

To end our interview, I asked Thabang what he wishes he knew before his arrival at Ivory Tower University. His response cantered around the negative and disabling consequence of racialised learning experience at the university. He singles out the over-representation of white academic staff to have perpetuated an unjust higher education experience.

THABANG: One of the things that I wish I really knew, I wish I knew that white people are not better than me. And that's the first thing. Because I think a lot of my development, one, as a poor person you have a lot more insecurities…. it has been very much entrenched within us to think they are better. So, it takes us a longer time to reconstruct that into , actually you're just another human being. And I think it took me a very long time. So, I wish, if that was clear

because it could've also influenced my learning processes. I'm taught 90% of the time, 95% of the time actually by white people, so it means this view affected my process of learning a lot, more than any other thing…the central thing is that you as a poor black person, you are incapable, you have a point to prove. But the problem with having a point to prove, you have to think about having a point to prove, where other people are just doing what they're doing, they're just continuing.

5.3 RENDANI'S STORY

5.3.1 Origins and Family Background

Rendani was born and raised in a remote village in rural Limpopo province, about 500 kilometres from Ivory Tower University, where she recently completed a BSc in Geography and Geology on record time. With her father alive but absent, Rendani was raised by her mother, elder sisters and grandmother. They all relied on her mother who worked as a "*cleaner*" and her grandmother's old age pension from the state. She "*grew up in a family of women, only women. So, my grandmother, my mother and I had three older sisters".*

Higher education participation rate in her community is *"very low"* and she believes people in her village generally *"do not take school seriously*". She was the first in her family to attend university. None of her 3 elder sisters went to university, one of them dropped out of a technical college.

5.3.2 Pathways En Route Higher Education

i. *Schooling Experiences and Higher Education Aspirations*

Rendani attended an overcrowded public school in her village where she quietly excelled academically to the surprise of most of her teachers. Despite being a "*shy person*", she was consistently the second highest ranked learner in the Maths and Science stream, earning several top achiever's certificates at school. Despite the lack of adequate resources, her schooling experiences was significantly enriched by her school principals' improvising spirit during their final

year of high school. Her school went above and beyond to improve the learners' school leaving results in order to improve their chances of meeting the universities' admission requirements.

> *RENDANI: …and so the same year our principal announced that we should, for our final year exam, we should come and stay at school, sleep over basically, studying and teaching people. I mean, I was one of the people who was doing well in geography and life sciences and maths and science now, you understand? Yes, so and then we did that, we helped each other…*

Where she needed additional assistance, she too improvised.

> *RENDANI: So, my grade twelve, I remember at the beginning of the year I was struggling with maths and science and I realized that it was not my problem, it was the teacher's problem because he literally couldn't teach us. But there was a certain teacher in our district called Mr Mange, so he was actually very good in maths and science, so we asked him if he could teach us on Saturdays and when schools are closed. And yes, he agreed.*

ii. *Higher education aspirations and choices*

Rendani always aimed higher academically. After grade 12's final examinations, Rendani was not just confident about passing, she expected to pass seven of our 8 subjects with distinctions. By her standard, her results were good but not great.

> *RENDANI: …and after the results came out…I was not that happy because I thought probably, I'd get like seven distinctions, except for Life Orientation. Yes, but I did well. I think I got two distinctions and that was geography and Tshivenda (here home language) and then I got 79, I think three 79's, including physical sciences. I ended up being awarded also as a top learner in geography in my district.*

After completing high school, the direction Rendani's post schooling journey would take was not immediately clear to her or her immediate family. "*That's like my family because there's no one who's been to University, they wouldn't really tell me much. I was like I passed, so what's next?"*

She identified her mother, grandmother and some of her teachers at school as her key stepping stones en route higher education. Importantly, *it is not so much what they did, instead, it is how they made*

her feel motivated to pursue her higher education aspirations. She saw higher education as a route to improving her family's living conditions upon completion. Additionally, compliments from her school teachers and the school's quarterly top achievers' awards also kept her motivated.

> *RENDANI: I could see they had, they believe in me, especially my mother. She believed in me and I could see this woman is actually tired of working and then I always had that dream of helping her out, you know, going to school, doing, finishing the house for her so that she can stop working and just relax.*

With regard to her choice of university Rendani's net was cast wide. While in grade 12 she applied for admission to three universities, including Ivory Tower University and Bush University. She had no strong prior knowledge about either institution. Her family members and considerations for availability of accommodation whilst studying played a influential role in her ultimate choice. Having one of her sisters working and living in Johannesburg made it easier for Rendani to choose Ivory Tower University.

> *RENDANI : I had applied at Ivory Tower University and then they told me that they are willing to accept me, but the final decision will come from my final matric results. So, I was just like that's it, I passed so they're probably going to take me. But my mother wanted me to go to the Bush University because it was nearer and probably because it's, you don't need residence, she doesn't have to pay for residence, she only has to buy a bus ticket for me. Yes, so the only person who was involved was my mother, and my sister for accommodation.*

> *I had a brother who is very successful, he advised for me to go to Ivory tower University, I wanted to go to Bush University coz its closer to my mom. So, my (step) brother didn't really shape my thoughts when it comes to going to Ivory Tower University. But then he just made sure that I understand that there's a difference between the Bush University and Ivory Tower University, which I took seriously…*

With regard to her chosen field of study, Rendani enrolled for a BSc in Geography and Geology. She confessed that upon enrollment she *"didn't know what geology was"*. Her "*successful*" brother who recommended Ivory Tower University also supported Geology, which happened to be Rendani's first choice. "*He (step brother) is doing geology and there is a lot of money"*. Being a top Geography learner

in her district made her add geography major in her first year of study at Ivory Tower University. She saw this achievement as "… *a sign that I had to go for geography. So, I did my geography first year".*

5.3.3 The Higher Education Experience

Negative Dimensions of Rendani's Higher Education Experience:

i. A hard landing on campus: Race, Class and Gender struggles at Ivory Tower University.

Rendani experienced a hard landing and turbulent transition into Ivory Tower University. Her turbulent transition was characterised by experiences of difficulty with the English language, lack of funding and reliable accommodation, lack of familiarity with the city and traumatic experiences of sexual harassment a few weeks into her first year of study at the university.

Funding challenges

Firstly, Rendani struggled to raise funds for registration at the relatively expensive Ivory Tower University. However, her excellent academic record and determined mother helped her manage to overcome this hurdle in two ways. The university's merit award scholarship converted the three distinctions she scored in her final year of high school into merit points which offset some of the registration fee. Additionally, her mother managed to borrow the difference in order to enable her to register as a student.

With a salary of a Domestic Worker, Rendani believes her mother could not , on her own, afford half of the registration fee at Ivory Tower University. She suspects that her mother took a loan but did not have the details. Both Rendani and her mother had no idea how they would come up with the rest of the tuition fee and related study material but were both happy she was a registered university student.

Accommodation and Gender-based struggles

Secondly, as a female working class student studying away from home, her lack of reliable accommodation led to traumatic experiences of sexual harassment. During her first year at university her older sister offered to stay with her, and this is where Rendani's gender-based struggles began. She narrated how her lack of accommodation made her fall prey to sexual harassment from her older sister's predatory boyfriend:

> *RENDANI: And you know, I really don't know how to say some things…there was a boyfriend who used to come in the house and he was, I would say the most uncomfortable person to be around…Because, I was doing my first year, the way he was treating me, it almost affected my academics, I was no longer feeling comfortable anymore because you know, when my sister was not around, let's say in the morning…she's up early and then she's taking the kids to school and going to work, he'll just, when I'm taking a shower, he will just open... And stand there. Yes, things like that. And yes, it got worse. I was doing my first year. I didn't even know how to approach my sister to tell her that I'm actually not feeling comfortable any more. And I couldn't phone my mother and tell her that I need to move out because of this. Back then it was not really expensive but I knew that my mom wouldn't afford to pay for it.*
>
> *Yes, so things got resolved. So, up until a day he came to my room in the morning, I was half naked because I was getting ready to go to school, I remember I was attending chemistry at 10:30. I had my pants on but then I didn't have a shirt, he just opened and I think, he was just like, he said he wanted a morning hug and I was just like okay, this is weird, I don't know what he means by that. And then he started pulling me to his bedroom, but you know what, by the works of God I managed to get out of the house by the way. Yes. And then still I couldn't tell my sister, but I managed to tell my brother from my father's side and he told my father and my father was unhappy with the news. And so that's when my father was like, you need to move out, you know. And this now became a family problem, understand, and when there was like family gatherings, people would look like me okay, this girl is a liar and things like that.*

Difficulty with English and a "very tormenting" first day in class

Rendani found her first day at Ivory Tower University particularly unsettling. It was race and intimidation at first sight:

> *RENDANI: The first day we went to Ivory Tower University … I went there and there were people, you know, white people. I was so intimidated, I didn't know what to do…So, you know, like my first year, because I was never used to being taught in English, so my first day in class, it was very tormenting. Like I did not know what the guy was talking about, I remember it was chemistry.*

Rendani's ability to acquire important social capital was also set back as not speaking out meant she would struggle to make friends at Ivory Tower University.

> *RENDANI : Well I faced challenges because of English, I couldn't communicate with people. I couldn't understand as much as I wanted to. Yes, and then I couldn't make friends, it was so difficult for me to make friends because people thought maybe I didn't speak or something.*

Positive Dimensions of Rendani's Higher Education Experience:

i. Familial Capital

Fortunately for her, Rendani's siblings provided a formidable support structure that helped her see past her immediate challenges. While her graduate brother provided emotional support, her siblings provided much needed support:

> *RENDANI: After class I called my brother and I was crying and I told him I cannot do this. I literally didn't understand anything the guy was saying. And then he was like "no, you'll be fine. I know that you will be fine because you did well. Just maintain the way you were doing it, don't try and change because probably adapting will be hard for you". So, what I did, after class I would study at my sister's place and then yes, that's how I managed to pass.*

Managing to navigate the English language challenge stands out as one of the positive dimensions of Rendani's experience during her first year of study. In her narrative she stresses that her English

problem had less to do with understanding what was being taught in English and a lot more to do with expressing herself in English:

> *RENDANI: … in class they see me as that person that is probably dumb but the thing was I was just not talking, I was just quiet. So, I was like okay, because these are people who speaks a lot in class, whenever he asks a question they're like all active and stuff, but then when it comes to me, I was struggling especially in group works because we used to rate each other and the group would rate me: "she's not really participating at all".*
>
> *But the thing was that I didn't really have words to say. I did have something in my mind but then I couldn't put it in a sentence or in a way that they would understand. Understand? So, my struggle was English basically, I couldn't, I could speak it but I was just shy to speak it out. I was, I couldn't speak it to that extent where I would be able to explain something to someone, especially in class. Yes, so I was doing well, especially in theory, but when it came to group works, I was not doing very well.*

ii. Transformative Faculty-Student Relations: An exception to the norm

As her grades continued to plummet, Rendani's resultant poor performance in group works caught the attention of her Geography Professor who successfully intervened.

> *RENDANI : He (professor) called me in and then I went in and he was like "you know, you're doing very well but if you cannot balance your theory, like the things you do in class and then group work, you won't pass with good marks because you need both of them". So, I was like, okay it's fine. That's when I started being active, though it came after some time. But I passed my first year, I passed everything and then I passed it well. The encounter had a lot of impact in my life because I remember … he was like, "I don't understand why you're getting 46% because I see your test marks are very good, and he was like I had to explain to him. And then I told him that I couldn't really interact that much. And then he's like he's going to give me 50% only if I promise that this is going to change. He actually did a lot of things that changed how I approached group work, you know, that was a positive one.*

Despite this positive and transformative encounter her Geography Professor, Rendani was quick to highlight that her experience was an exception to the norm when it comes to how *"women coming from disadvantaged backgrounds"* are usually treated by academic staff.

> *RENDANI*: *But you know, as women, you know other, especially women coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, sometimes our lecturers, they can use that to their own advantage. I think when I was doing my Honours, a lot of geography students had like a problem with a certain lecturer because he came to them, like he had these one to one sessions where you had to open up to him. He opens up to you and then you open up to him and you tell him what you are, where you come from, something like this, where you come from, what are the challenges, can he help you with something like, even if you want financial help. Understand? Only to find out that he actually abused some of those students. So, I feel like especially first years, new students to the University, as much as they want to feel like they're being welcomed or taken care of, they also have to look out for those kinds of people who are you know, not there literally for help.*

iii. Beyond the First Year of Study: Top Achiever

Despite the class, race, language and gender-based struggles that marked her hard landing at Ivory Tower University, Rendani managed to successfully complete her first year of study at the university. Armed with relevant and timely information, she successfully applied and qualified for an NSFAS grant and loan package that covered her tuition, accommodation and meals for the rest of her undergraduate degree.

Once fully funded, settled and past her first year of study, Rendani did not only excel academically but she graduated with grades second to only one person at Ivory Tower University's department of geography.

> *RENDANI: … I did well the second year and also third year. Yes, so when I was doing my Honours, they (NSFAS) still paid for me, I was staying at res (university accommodation). And I got, I actually got an award again for being under top two for under-graduate students, in Geography Department.*

Looking Back - Rendani Reflections on the South African Field of Higher Education:

I asked Rendani to look back and reflect on why she thinks she successfully completed her studies in the midst of stubbornly high dropout rates financial aid funded students in South African higher education. She singled out her persistent "*mentality*".

> MUKOVHE: *what do you feel you brought to University that you feel contributed to you successfully completed your studies? So, what do you believe you brought, what did you bring to University that you think helped you thrive?*
>
> RENDANI: *I think, that's a very difficult question, but let me think. I think I came with a mentality that you know, I've been doing it in my high school, from my high school I've been doing it and then though I had lost that mentality at some point during a few days at the University, but then I came back, I went back to my senses of you know what, I am here now and then I have to keep the mentality that I had when I was doing my matric. That was basically just focusing on what I'm being taught.*

To end our hour-long interview I asked her what, in her experience, appears to be some of the key contributors to the high dropout rate amongst financial aid students. She acknowledged to not know much about the subject, but she identified two NSFAS specific factors based on her personal experience. The first was students who are "financially excluded" because of being partially funded. "*There are people around me who I started with who had to drop out because of finance. Those are the only people I know. They had to drop out because they couldn't pay for accommodation".*

She further identified NSFAS's administrative deficiencies and poor handling of student information. Each time she had to renew her funding *"there was always a document missing…my mom always had to write an affidavit saying she is the only person looking after me and then, she's a single parent".* Rendani felt that the administrative burden NSFAS places on families does not take into account the literacy levels of the very families who need help, which results to students' funding being discontinued on administrative grounds.

5.4 LERATO'S STORY

5.4.1 Origins and Family Background

Lerato, 24, graduated from Bush University with a Bachelor of Science in Urban and Regional Planning.

Lerato was born in a rural village of Tshikororo in Vhembe District of the Limpopo province north of South Africa. With his father absent, he was raised at his grandparents' house where him and his step sister lived together with the rest of the family. He states early in his narrative that *"… where we stay and where we call home is my grandmother's house where my mother's parents stay. So, almost all of us; my uncles, my aunts, we all stay in one house."*

Lerato was born to a family of graduates. Unlike the typical story of a working-class student in post-apartheid South Africa, Lerato is not a "first generation" university student. Not only are his grandparents college graduates, both his sister and mother are alumnus of the same university he graduated from. When I asked him to expand on his family background, he proudly narrated his family's educational credentials.

> *LERATO: So, I'll start by telling you the educational background of my grandparents themselves. They were college graduates and then they were both principals at a primary school and secondary school. My grandmother being at primary, my grandfather being at secondary. Then their children also are college and university graduates, they've encouraged them to go to universities and which they did very well. They are all, almost all of them are educated with higher education. So, when it comes to us, it's me and my sister, by the time I was born my mother was a university student at Bush University.*

With his mother unemployed, Lerato and his sister lived off their grandparents' contributions as well as proceeds from their mother's entrepreneurial efforts. At this formative stage of his life story, Lerato identified her mother and grandparents as very key pillars behind his origins and upbringing. The excerpt below paints a picture of Lerato's socio-economic background and the environment in which he was raised:

LERATO: My mother was not employed by then but she used to sell sweets, snacks, airtime at the university. Sometimes she used to take part-time work at construction sites just for us to go to school. One of the highlights of my upbringing was I did not have a father who was supportive. My sister also did not have a father who was really hands-on in terms of their support, so it was quite difficult for my mother to raise us up away from home and as young as we were. We occupied only one room where it was the bathroom, the kitchen and everything was in that one room because it was the only affordable thing that we could afford away from home.

Later in our interview, in order to get a sense of his community's higher education participation rate, I asked Lerato if it was common for young people in his community to consider attending university after completing secondary school. His response painted a picture of growing popularity, awareness and demand for higher education in his community. He pointed out that *"for the past five years there has been a lot of youth who are striving to go to university"*. He later proudly made reference to the role his church was playing in propelling higher education aspirations in his village:

LERATO: Even today back in our church, we promote more of academic excellence. Right now, I think here, from my church back at home, we have about five students now whom are now some of them are doing grade 12 and their aim is to make sure that they go to university. I think we are, in the village, in the small village that we have, we are the only church with a lot of educated young people.

5.4.2 Pathway En Route Higher Education

i. Schooling Experiences

Working class parental involvement and the pursuit of "better education"

When Lerato and his sister reached nursery age, their mother, against his grandparent's wishes, moved them from their village to a *"private school"* near the small town of Thohoyandou where she believed they offered *"better education"*. She used proceeds from hawking at the university and part time work from construction sites to pay for their schooling. *"But then came a time where private school fees used to go up and up and up then she couldn't afford to take us to school anymore and we had to move to public schools"*. When Lerato's grandparents opposed the move to a private school, his mother replied:

> *LERATO: "No, my children have to go to a place where the education is in another level compared to the village that we come from."*

Lerato later found out that his mother's attention to detail informed the school choice. *"…when I asked my mum, "Why this secondary school?"* She said, *"Because when you were young you used to draw a lot."* The school not only offered a diverse range of subjects but was also *"one of the top preforming schools around the region"*. Lerato's mother's direct and indirect involvement in his educational journey contradicts much of what has been written about working class parents' deficient lack of involvement in their children's educational aspirations.

ii. Higher Education Aspirations

For Lerato University was a natural post schooling destination. He identified three key features about his origins and family background that propelled his higher education aspirations: *being born to a family of college and university graduates*; *his desire to uplift his family*; and *the influential role of the church.*

The first inspiration was his family of grandparents and mother who are college and university graduates. He says his grandparents particularly made it clear *"that there is no way we are going to have a family member who is not educated and who will not go to university"* and for as long as he can remember Lerato *"always knew that at some point I will have to go to university"*. This belief was cemented when his older sister qualified to enrol for an extended Bachelor of Commerce degree at Bush University.

Secondly, Lerato identifies his desire to lift the poverty *"weight out of my mother's shoulders"* as one of the key motivations behind his pursuit for academic excellence at school in order to qualify to go

to university. He credits his mother's involved and hands on approach in this regard. In her absence Lerato's mother *"used to call every time just to check with me if I'm studying or not"*.

> *LERATO: … I thought if I don't make it out of my grade 12, I will be adding to the poverty that we have as me, my sister and my mother. So obviously, I realised I had to get the weight out of my mother's shoulders and try to work harder and harder to make sure that I go to university.*

Thirdly, Lerato identified religion and the social capital he accumulated at church as key pillars behind his higher education aspirations. *"My grandparents are pastors, so they shape us a lot" he said proudly. The church played key and enabling roles not only in his educational journey but that of fellow congregants.* Lerato recalls how his *"quite uplifting"* pastor and *"church mates"* played the role of "stepping stones" (Arbouin, 2018, p. 37) in his pathway enroute higher education.

At the church, Lerato was part of a youth group (acquired social capital with a multiplier effect) amongst whom where university students who also played a role of a stepping stone for him . *"They would invite me to campus sometimes just to come and be with them, just to come and show me how things are going at the university"*. To cement this point about his church's contribution to his aspirations and pathway enroute higher education, Lerato narrated how at one point his pastor made a crucial intervention while Lerato and his class mates were preparing for their final school leaving examinations:

> *LERATO: I remember when we were here, the pastor at the church used to say, "I will take you to school late at night so that you go and study with the others and you form study groups." So, I would call him at around 1am, 2am, 3am to come and pick us up at school just because he saw potential in me.*

iii. Higher Education Choices

When choosing the institution, Lerato felt Bush University was "*the only option*" for him. His choice of Bush University was taken out of financial considerations. Tuition fee at Bush University is relatively affordable when compared to other HEIs. Additionally, the university's rural location

meant the cost of living is lower which makes it easier for students to commute daily from home and avoid the cost of student housing . He explained:

> *LERATO … in terms of choice of choosing a university that I have to go to, it was also limited because of the background that I come from. So, the only option for university was Bush University because of my financial background and my mother's employment status.*

Lerato's choice of Urban and Regional Planning as a career of choice was thought out. He took into consideration his "*passion"* for "*technical drawing*", his "*strengths*", alignment with the subjects he was good at in high school and consideration for *"scarce skills in our country"*. He appeared particularly strategic about his career prospects and options. He specifically went for a degree that majored in subjects he was good at in high school. When he failed to meet the admission requirements for his preferred programme, he opted for an "*extended*" version of the same degree. The except below illustrates Lerato's meticulous thought process in choosing to enrol for a BSc in Town and Regional Planning at Bush University.

> *LERATO: So I was very bad with the others (subjects) but with technology I was good. So, that's where I realised my strength and I used to enjoy doing sketches of cartoons, sketches of people. So I was like the only stream that I can take is technical drawings. So, my second choice was just environmental science because my aunt's daughter was doing environmental science by then at the university, …its requirements were minimal compared to urban and regional planning. So …those were my choices. Okay, they were shaped around my capabilities, my skills, the skills that I had. So, when I applied, I was pre-admitted to urban and regional planning provided I pass my grade 12, my maths and science very well. I got a 56 in maths and 49 in science which was not enough for me to do urban and regional planning. So, I had an option to go for my second choice or to go for the extended year programme. So, I opted for extended year programme. My passion laid with technical drawings and that's what I wanted to do. And looking at how town planning by then was rated, it was one of the scarce skills in our country, so I opted for it.*

5.4.3 The Higher Education Experience

Positive Dimensions of Lerato's Higher Education Experience:

i. Higher Education Transition: A relatively Smooth landing on campus

"I always looked forward to every day… I am going to take on university with all that I have."

Lerato experienced a **relatively smooth landing at Bush University**. From day one he never felt out of place nor struggle to integrate into the university. He always looked forward to be a university student, never felt like a "fish out of water" at Bush University, instead he "*looked forward to every day*" and was "*going to take on university with all that I have"*. The excerpt below illustrates Lerato's mindset and first impressions upon arrival at Bush University.

> *LERATO: So, there's this song that I used to love by Akon, it goes like, "Who ever thought that I'd see this day? Where I would see my ghetto life fade away. So now I look forward to every day." So, when I went to university, my first time when I went to university when I felt like now I am a qualified student at the university, I always looked forward to every day, that I am going to take on university with all that I have. I'm going to give it my all, I'm going to give it my best. That was the initial moment that I had.*

At this critical transition phase, Lerato appears armed with navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) and a transformative habitus (Mills,2008) that contradicts the often deficit expectations that working-class students will likely to feel like a "fish out of water" upon arrival in higher education.

Lerato proceeded to highlight circumstances he believed to have contributed to his relatively smooth transition and landing at Bush university. The first enabling factor has to do with the location of Bush University, being located in his rural community less than a kilometre away from his high school. This facilitated Lerato's enhanced familiarity with the university's space. The second factor he identified was his family's expectations of

him, his sense of obligation to his family, and his desire to show that he was also capable of achieving academically like the rest of his family. He explained:

> *LERATO: But again, what interested me the most is the positive response that I had from the family. It was positive to a point that I could feel that I have role to play now . I have something that I have to give it to the family that I have to show to the family that I'm also capable of {Mindset}. So, it was one of those moments that made me enjoy my university level.*

Thirdly, Lerato benefitted significantly from having his older sister around who was already a university student at the same campus.

Fourthly, his relatively smooth landing on campus was further enabled by acquired much social capital. He was welcomed on campus by members of his church's youth group some of whom were already graduates and pursuing their post-graduate studies. Lerato narrate how the social capital acquired through his church's youth group on campus led to a transformative "multiplier effect" (Crul et al, 2017, p. 321) throughout his higher education experience.

> *LERATO: … I had people and friends who were at university before I was there. So, when they found out that I am with them, the support that I got from them was quite… it was very positive. Because every time at our church, every year they have what you call "student day". They call all their graduates who used to church with them, also university students, to just come there and motivate others. So that was one of the main thing I always wished and wanted to achieve that I graduate and also join the others.*

Fifthly, Lerato's smooth transition and landing on campus was further enhanced by the fact that he received his NSFAS funding approval on time at the beginning of his first year of study at Bush University. He believes securing steady funding on time further had a multiplier effect higher education experience and outcomes. Although Lerato did not apply for NSFAS funding on time, "*luckily enough, I was one of those who were selected to be funded by NSFAS even though I was going for the extended year programme".* He found out about this opportunity from his sister who was also part of the extended degree programme funded by NSFAS at Bush University.

ii. Transformative side to juggling part-time work and university

In his 2nd year of study, Lerato narrate how taking up part-time work during his second year of study improved his academic performance, relationship to his course and his overall higher education experience. Specifically, the income from his part time work not only improved his wellbeing on campus but further enabled him to send some money back home to his family. In the excerpt below, he proudly explains the transformative impact of part-time work on his higher education experience:

> *LERATO: I started doing my own part time job which was drawing house plans because I had skill, they taught us how to draw house plans at first level. So for me to provide other things for myself and relieve the weight from my mother, I started drawing house plans for people extending their houses. So that was the moment I started to see a future in the course of study that I took that I can do better. I was recommended by people whom I worked for, recommended to other people that "there's a student I know whose good with this and that who's good at providing house plans for an affordable price". So that's when I saw there's a whole lot of a future in the course that I took and actually trying to show me that I can get rid of the background that we used to have if I can continue with it and if I can continue working hard in it.*

iii. Beyond the first year of study: "smooth"

Once past his first year of study, Lerato's journey through higher education was a "smooth" one.

> *LERATO: So, my second level to my third level was quite a smooth transition because I also worked hard to qualify for accommodation on campus where NSFAS used to cover for those costs. So my second level, my third level was quite smooth and I passed all my modules with a number of distinctions.*
>
> *On my final year that's when I got a bursary from a private company because of the person that I worked for to design a house plan for … he said because I'm good with*

what I'm doing, he's going to try to get me a bursary which covered everything, also gave me living allowances. So, yes…that's the story of my life.

Negative Dimensions of Lerato's Experience in Higher Education:

i. Extended Degree Programme: "So it was like going back to high school level"

Despite what appears to be a relatively smooth landing on campus, Lerato's first year of study experience was not without hinderances. His first nadir moment came when he failed to directly qualify for his degree programme and had to settle for the extended version of the BSc in Urban and Regional Planning. The extended programme is a foundational phase for those who narrowly miss the basic admission requirements. There is an existing stigma amongst university students that equates extended degrees to repeating high school. Lerato acknowledges that this stigma got to his head and as a result he *"approached my first semester very negatively"*. As a result, *"my first semester results were very bad because out of six modules, I failed three"*. These results placed him at risk of losing his funding.

Consequently, during the second semester, Lerato experienced what he considered to be a turning point in both his attitude towards his extended degree programme and the higher education experience as a whole. The National Students Financial Aid scheme has a condition attached to its grant and loan packages that requires beneficiaries to pass at least 50% of their modules in order to retain funding for the following academic year. To Lerato this was a wake-up call:

LERATO: I had to change my mindset because I heard about failing almost half of your modules, NSFAS will kick you out of their system because you are not performing very well. I think because of that experience, you know me being afraid to be dropped out by the financial aid that I had, it motivated me to perform well. It motivated me to approach university academics in a different perspective and in a different way. But my main aim was to say, "My funding, I need to secure my funding." That's why my second

semester was very good because I even got a distinction, one distinction from that with an 80%.

ii. Borrowing and Squatting

The second hinderance to Lerato's higher education experience came as a result of NSFAS's "top slicing" practice. Top slicing occurs when NSFAS partially funds students in order for the funding to reach a larger number of students. It happens as a result of the demand for funding outstripping the amount NSFAS funds allocated to each individual university. This practice is particularly prominent in historically black, working -class and grossly underfunded institutions such as Bush University. Due to a relatively low cost of tuition, their geographic location and more accessible admission requirements, historically disadvantaged institutions attract and enrol the highest proportion of poor and working-class students from rural and township communities.

Lerato's NSFAS funding package did not cover accommodation and some of his study material such as *"technical instruments which were very expensive"*. Unable to afford he *"went for a few months without that equipment, I could only borrow from my classmates who used to have"*. In order to keep up with his academic work he persistently improvised {habitus}: *"So instead of me working at the same time with them, my time was extended until early hours like 2am, 3am, that's when I would be starting with my drawings"*.

As the academic load grew demanding and in order to access campus facilities without risking his safety walking home, Lerato became a squatter by renting part of the room from a student who lived in one of the on-campus student housing:

> *LERATO: So, I used to knock off late just to take the risk of walking at night back to the house. By then since second level was too demanding in terms of studio work, I had to try by all means to get accommodation on campus. So the only way was to buy in or being a squatter. Squatting from someone who has a room on campus, paying monthly or per semester. So I opted for that so that I am closer to school…*

Looking back:

Towards the end of our interview, I asked Lerato to look back at his life story and identify individuals or organisations that played a particularly key role in his journey to completion at Bush University. He identified individuals and social structures that evolved from being his "stepping stones" (Arbouin, 2018) en route higher education into his pillars of a critical support structure during his higher education experience. Looking back at his journey to completion in higher education, Lerato reiterated the critical role played by his **grandparents** who:

> *LERATO: would support me financially, those are the people whom I always ran to whenever I'm feeling low, whenever I feel like there's a lot of pressure in terms of school. They are also my pastor so I could call them and say, "There's a lot of pressure at school, I feel like I cannot make it." But they would always try to give me motivation, they would call me frequently there and there just to ask me, "What's the progress? How are things going? Are you working hard? Are you passing? Just keep on going. There's always an ending out of these things." So they played a very important role in me getting to a point where I am today.*

The second pillar of his support structure was his mother who:

> *LERATO: was one of my drivers because considering her employment status, she made it a point that we understand whatever that she sacrificed, she sacrificed for me to make sure that I complete my university education. Her role was to always remind me of what I went to university for. That's what she used to do.*

The third pillar Lerato was members of his church in and outside of the university.

> *LERATO: They would not only support me academically, to say whenever you need academic break, we will always pray for you and the church. We will always give you that support. And they've been saying that a "student that needs anything", we should come to the church. That's why they are the ones who also employed my mother to say, "We want you take your children to school, to university. To give them food, to give them money to buy academic things." So, they've been supportive in that way.*

Finally, Lerato identified his "best friend" who was his "neighbour from home" as one of the pillars of his support structure at Bush University. The excerpt below illustrates Lerato and his friend translated their humble beginnings into a source of intrinsic motivation to persist in higher education.

> *LERATO: That's my best friend. He's my neighbour from home, he came here…he did a course that he did not want to do, media studies. But along the way him and I got really close to a point that when he was performing well in his media studies courses, I said, "No, you cannot do better than me." The guy played a very important role because when we meet every day, when I started to isolate myself from the other groups, we could talk about academics…So, throughout the year it's been a journey for me and him to a point that he became one of the best in his degree and I became one of the best in my degree.*
>
> *… we used to remind ourselves of the background where we come from, that we need to change the perspective of things back at home. We need to change the perspective of those who are coming before us at home so that we become real examples to them. And yes, that was one of the things that pushed me to complete my studies…not forgetting the background that I come from…the primary objective was to say I need to finish so that I change the background that I come from.*

As our interview drew to a close, Lerato placed the influence and roles played by these key individuals at the door step of his successful completion of his undergraduate degree at Bush University. Lerato's life story and journey to and through higher education had a happy landing of completion.

NSFAS

He placed emphasis on a few negative dimensions of his experience as an NSFAS funded student. These included: uncertain and often late payments, the NSFAS voucher system, and partial funding that did not cover crucial costs such as printing and study material.

Future Plans?

> *LERATO: My plans are to continue to go for masters. I applied for masters at WITS, urban design. I also applied for another degree LLB UNISA. A distant learning at UNISA to do law. Just to spice up what I have right now because a degree is never enough in this evolving world of ours. You always have to get something more than just a degree, more than just an honours degree because everyone has honours degrees. So, my plans are to go for masters and start a new degree. Also in the process is to register my company, my town planning and architecture company which I've been doing things for years so that I can be able to finance my further education.*

5.5 RANZU'S STORY

5.5.1 Origins and Family Background

Ranzu (21) graduated from Bush University with a BSc in Environmental Sciences

Ranzu was born in a village in the mostly rural Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, a few hours drive from Bush University. Her father worked as a mineworker until he passed away when she was a year old. Her father's passing left Ranzu and her siblings entirely dependent on their mother who worked as a farmworker and later a domestic worker before she fell ill. Despite these humble beginnings Ranzu feels her mother *"tried her best to make sure that we don't sleep with an empty stomach"*. Their living conditions improved marginally when her brother and sister found work at a pharmacy and as a cashier respectively.

5.5.2 Pathways En Route Higher Education

i. Schooling Experiences

After briefly introducing her family background, Ranzu smiles before proudly declaring that *"I was the bright student at school,* ***so I always came out number one*** *and then* ***I had teachers who always encouraged me".*** Despite being bullied because of her hair, Ranzu recounts not only excelling academically but always being on top of her class. This trend continued well into her secondary schooling level. She *"enjoyed secondary level because in grade eight I was the bright student again and I came out number one, then I was promoted, I didn't do grade nine, I went straight to grade ten".*

Ranzu recalls pursuing academic excellence at school as a way to deal with the **social isolation** that came with the experience of being bullied because of her hair. She insists the bullying *"didn't discourage me, I always passed".* She identifies her promotion from grade 8 to grade 10 without having to do grade 9 as the highlight of her schooling experience and a particularly uplifting moment in response to the bullying she had endured in her village.

> *RANZU: That was the best moment of my life because in my village, like most of the kids or people of the same age as me, they hated me. Like seriously. I grew up without friends. I grew up without friends, but then when I got promoted, I was very happy because it like, I felt like I became something they wished I would never become. So that was the best moment.*

ii. Higher Education Aspirations and Choices

What stands out with regard to her higher education aspirations, Ranzu received strong motivation and career awareness from as early as primary school. Strong motivation towards academic excellence came from one of her school teachers who instilled a strong culture of hard work:

> *RANZU: So, I had this other teacher at school, she was always encouraging me to pass. She will always give me money just to challenge me to make sure that I pass, and she will tell me if I don't pass, I have to give that money back to her. So that's how I was encouraged to pass grade twelve.*

Quite markedly, from as early as primary school she already had a preferred career path and was aware of the subject stream she had to follow in order to meet higher education admission requirements. She *"always wanted to be a scientist when still at primary so I chose to do science at secondary level till grade twelve".*

When applying to university her preferred field of study was a BSc in Plant Pathology. She was *"encouraged by how they explained the career(s)"* paths emanating from this programme during a career guidance session she attended whilst in secondary school. Her second choice was a BSc in Environmental Science. After completing high school, Ranzu failed to meet the admission requirements for her first choice and had to settle for her second choice.

With regard to her choice of institution, Ranzu listed the comprehensive Merger University as her first choice, the elite Pretoria University as her second choice and the historically black only, under resourced and rural based Bush University as her third choice. Similarly, she didn't make it into her preferred degree programme and had to settle for her second choice. She explained how her choice process came about:

> *RANZU: I wasn't planning to come to Bush University. My dream was to go to Merger University or University of Pretoria. Merger University, I couldn't qualify due to my lower marks in maths and physics. So I got an acceptance letter from Bush University. And then at Bush University I applied for plant science as my first option but because of maths and physics I was not accepted, I was accepted in my second option. So I decided to do environmental sciences because I always wanted to do something with science. So that's why I chose the field of study. By then I used to hate this degree… but going through the modules I started falling in love with the degree because I got exposed to the environment, so I started loving the degree.*

With her description of higher education participation rate in her community as *"very low",* I asked Ranzu if and when she knew would make it to university. Her response pointed to grade 12 first term examination results.

> *When I passed in March, my points were very high and then from there I knew I was going to university because even my teachers were encouraging me to apply. They were sure that I will qualify for university. From there I was very sure I was going to university.*

In response, Ranzu also identified the church and a particularly influential person within the church who was also a first-generation working-class graduate, *the "youth coordinator at the church",* as key stepping stones in her pathway to higher education.

> *…the person who really encouraged me to go to university was our youth coordinator at church. He was the first person to go to university in his family. So he always encouraged us as youth at church that whatever situation you're going through, we can make it. So from there I always believed, even myself, I can do it. So from there I was encouraged that I am going to go to university.*

5.5.3 The Higher Education Experience

Negative Dimensions of Ranzu's Higher Education Experience:

i. Quite a hard landing on campus

Upon arrival at Bush University Ranzu *"didn't know anything about NSFAS"*. This meant she would have to endure long ques meant for students awaiting to make a late application for NSFAS funding at the university. At the time, Bush University, unlike the entirely digitized elite institutions, was still predominantly reliant on manual paper-based applications for both academic admission and NSFAS funding applications. The manual paper-based system at Bush University led to stampedes of thousands of working-class students fighting for the limited available spaces. Additionally, the vulnerability of the paper-based system to manipulation has led to reported cases of corruption and inconsistency in allocation of funds. Ranzu explains the scene:

> *RANZU: … when it came to the NSFAS part… it was a very very very bad moment I experienced because we had to queue and the queue was very long, it was hot…We would wake up around 04:00 AM just to join the queue, but when you get there the queue is already long. You have to, they would even close while we are still queuing…so we would have to keep on going to the queue every day but we couldn't get help until we decided to apply online… And then on the day that I applied for NSFAS, this other lady I met was accepted to register while she doesn't have an acceptance from NSFAS, but I wasn't accepted to register . So that was a very sad moment for me.*

At the beginning of Ranzu's first year of study, the phasing in of online NSFAS applications at Bush University was still on trial stages. After enduring long ques in the hot sun for two days without luck, Ranzu tried her luck and applied for NSFAS online. It paid off, the following day she received SMS confirmation that she may proceed to register.

ii. The Student Housing Crisis: *"I had to squat; I didn't consider de-registering."*

While the student housing crisis is present across South African University, it is particularly severe at historically black only universities such as Bush University (DHET, 2012). For working class students who live far from campus, one has to choose between the cost and inconvenience of having to commute daily or illegally squatting (sub-letting) from students who secured University accommodation. For those who choose to squat, subletting comes with its own disabling conditions. Given its informality, those who squat are always at the mercy of the legitimate tenant and at times have to endure abusive conditions. Financial extortion and sexual harassment of squatting students is particularly rampant at Bush University**.**

Having gone past the funding hurdle, the student housing crisis presented another major hurdle for Ranzu. Lacking a conducive place to stay almost forced her to de-register from the university but she refused and chose to persist. Her persistence paid off when she successfully completed her first year of study:

> *RANZU: … I was closer to de-registering…I faced a lot of challenges due to accommodation. So it always discouraged me because even my mom at home, she was always telling me come back home, "it doesn't help to stay there while you don't have any place to sleep". But then I had to squat, I didn't consider de-registering.*
>
> *I couldn't get accommodation on campus. They told me the accommodation was full and so I had to look for a place to stay. I stayed with my friends for a month but I couldn't cope because I had to buy everything in the room…I didn't have enough money but I had to pay for everything in the room. So I had to leave the room around February, I went to this other girl and squat again.*

> *Things were okay but when we were approaching the year end, things got bad again. I had to buy food again for her using my food allowance from NSFAS. And even though I bought for her, they wouldn't last for two weeks. So I had to also ask money from my family to buy food again for us. So, but I coped, I finished my first year, I passed well.*

During her second year of study Ranzu's application for accommodation was once again rejected. She protests that *"…but I had good marks, my average was good, I qualified for the room"*. This dimension of her experience at Bush University brought to light an interesting side of the university's accommodation allocation policies and practices. In response to the severe shortage of student accommodation spaces, the university allocates the available rooms to the top preforming students. This practice is not unique to Bush University. Despite the accommodation challenges, Ranzu managed to pass all her modules and progressed to her third year of study.

Ranzu recalls how securing accommodation on campus significantly improved her higher education experience in a manner that paved her road to completion:

> *RANZU: But then 2016 in my final year, things changed because I got accommodation on campus so I didn't face any challenge. I was staying in a single room and I was staying alone. So I didn't face many challenges. I passed well and then I managed to graduate . I could study any time, go to the library any time. I had access to everything. I had food allowance from NSFAS so I didn't face many challenges. That's what drove me to graduate, that was my turning point.*

iii. A deadly field of higher education: "Others were killed"

To conclude our interview, I asked Ranzu to reflect beyond her own experience and share with me why she thinks so many of her fellow NSFAS-funded working-class students continue to dropout in numbers. She singled out *"financial and accommodation problems"*. Ranzu emphasized accommodation and food insecurity to be "*a very serious problem"*. She then proceeded to narrate horrific stories about the plight of her fellow working-class students at Bush University. They ranged from stories of hunger to others being robbed and killed:

RANZU: … financial problems and accommodation problems… during my process of applying at university, that first day I met this lady, we were just queuing together when we got an acceptance letter. She got an acceptance letter from the university but then she couldn't get funding. So she had to then go back home because she didn't have a financial sponsor to fund her studies. So I think financial problems play a role in dropping out of students at the universities. And then accommodation again, this is a very serious problem in universities, especially at Bush University. Because many of us, when we started registering, we didn't get accommodation.

So others had to stay off campus. Off campus is dangerous , others were killed, they were robbed and then they had to go back home because they had no place to stay. And then one other thing, through this financial problem, it's food problems. Because I met a lot of people who had this challenge, more specially on my third level. So people, they just go to university, they attend, they don't have food and they don't have what they call toiletries. So that's another serious issue because me and my friend ended up having this other lady who would always come into my room or my friend's room to shower and then use our stuff and then go to class. So I think this is another problem that leads to drop outs.

Positive Dimensions of Ranzu's Higher Education Experience:

i. Persistence: ***"I wanted to complete the mission I started"***

As our interview drew to a close, our focus moved to how Ranzu stayed motivated to completion despite her demoralizing living conditions as a squatting student at Bush University. First, she identified being a first-generation university student and her commitment to improving *"the situation at home"* as her first source of motivation and staying motivated. She narrated:

RANZU: Because I knew the situation at home. I'm the first to go to the university at home. My brother yes, he is a pharmacist but he's not that very much educated. So, me forcing to study and get a degree, it was due to my situation at home because I wanted to change the situation at home. And then I never wanted to be a drop out. I wanted to complete the mission I started.

Secondly, Ranzu identified the fluence of the friend she met during the registration period at Bush University her source of staying motivated. Ranzu particularly isolated the difficult conditions her friend studied under as an experience that made her see her own glass as half full and not half empty.

> *RANZU: What pushed me, it was also my friend, the one that I met here at the university. So she never got NSFAS, she only got NSFAS at her third level {year of study}. So she was staying off campus in this other residence, at the back of the university. So that residence, it's dangerous, they are always being attacked but then she never gave up. So she was always pushing me saying "at least you have NSFAS that is paying for your tuition, at least you are getting food allowance from NSFAS, as for myself, I'm depending at home, they have to pay for my tuition, I have to stay off campus where it's dangerous. So at least just hold on until you graduate" So she always pushed me.*

Thirdly, Ranzu identified the influence of her mentor, the youth **coordinator at the church**, as another source of motivation to persist. Learning about the challenges that her mentor faced during his time at the university made Ranzu see her hinderances as "*nothing compared to what he was facing*". This too "*pushed"* Ranzu to persist.

Given the learning conditions at Bush University, Ranzu believes only "*perseverance*" and *"toughening up"* to the situation enables successful completion of one's studies. She drew inspiration from stories of survival of the fittest told by both her lecturers and mentor from the church. While at university, Ranzu's mentor had no place to sleep, he used to go around friend asking for food just to get by.

Future Plans: Post Graduate studies

> *RANZU: I'm planning to apply for masters. I'll be writing my masters proposal, so I want to do my masters and from there I want exposure to work first before I decide to do PHD.*

5.6 RISUNA'S STORY

5.6.1 Origins and Family Background

Risuna (25) Graduated from Merger University with a National Diploma in Mechanical Engineering. He currently works for ESKOM, South Africa's National Energy Utility, as a Coding Technician. I was introduced to Risuna by the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), an NGO that has partnered with the Department of Higher Education and Training to make NSFAS funding accessible to rural youth. REAP also provide continuous on-campus support to NSFAS funded-working class students under its umbrella. REAP secured NSFAS funding on Risuna's behalf and further provided him with continuous on and off campus psycho-social support and a stipend were NSFAS funding fell short.

After securing an appointment over the phone he directed me to Thembisa Township where he currently resides. Thembisa is one of the biggest Townships in and around Johannesburg with s population of just under half a million people cramped up in an area of 42.8 km². A very soft spoken Risuna warmly welcomed me into his room he rents in someone's backyard. The fact that we were introduced by the Director of REAP, an organisation he holds in high regard, seemed to cement a level of trust and comfort between the two of us.

Risuna was born in Kwamatatani Village just outside of Giyani Town in rural Limpopo province. The village is located just under 500 kilometres away from Merger University. Like many parts of Limpopo Province, his village has very high levels of unemployment, low income levels and little to no economic activity in this area. Much of the community relies on government's monthly social security grant for their daily survival (Statistics South Africa, 2019).

Risuna was raised by both parents but at some point, they got separated and he remained with his mother. He has five siblings, one currently enrolled at Bush University and another at a community college. He, along with his five siblings, grew up dependent on the income their mother earned as a hawker and when *"she was working as a domestic worker"*. Their mother also earned the R410 monthly social grant provided by the South African government to mothers with children under the age of 18. When Risuna reached University, his mother stopped working and the social security grant became their family's only source of income. It is these humble beginnings that made him an eligible beneficiary of the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

5.6.2 Pathways Enroute Higher Education

i. Schooling Experiences: negative stereotyping and low expectations

Given his working-class family background Risuna didn't take anything more than his willingness to learn to school. In his primary school's memorable experiences, Risuna recalls having to run home every lunchtime as he could not afford to buy food at school. He remembers his mother working as a hawker selling just outside the primary school. Notably, Risuna did not say much about his parents' involvement in his schooling experiences at this stage of his educational journey.

In secondary school, Risuna's grades did not get off to a good start. He would particularly fail maths and science. This invited experiences of negative stereotyping and low expectations from his mathematics teacher who insisted that he was not suited for careers in mathematics and sciences , and suggested that he pursues history or geography instead. Risuna identified his teacher's low expectations of him as one of the earliest nadir moments in his educational journey. By Grade 10, Risuna stage Risuna recalls experiencing a strong sense of self-belief and determination despite maths teacher's low expectations of him

> *RISUNA: I ended up telling myself I will do it irrespective of what others are saying…every class they (Maths and Science teacher) would ask "you're still here, what are you doing here?" They would say those things. To be honest, if I was someone who maybe didn't know what I wanted then, I was going to change. So, I think the most thing that pushed me is that I knew that I wanted to do engineering. Because I think back then I wanted mechanical or mining, so both of them they wanted, they needed maths. So, yes, that's why I insisted.*

Contrary to his teacher's low expectations Risuna passed and comfortably progressed to grade 11. His academic performance significantly improved when he took up extra winter lessons in order to improve his grades during the mid-year school holidays. He swiftly improved from barely making it to occupying the second top achiever spot in class. He adds that *"even the teacher who was saying you cannot do this subject, she was also, referring people to me".* At the end of grade 11 Risuna comfortably passed and progressed to the final year of secondary school. Later in our interview , Risuna identified his grades improvement at this stage as one of his peak moments en route higher education.

When the schooling conditions added to their challenges, Risuna and his group of classmates displayed resilience and ability to adapt and improvise. In a courageous move, faced with a massive teacher strike in their final year of secondary school, Risuna narrates how him and his classmates

formed a group that strategized and devised means to minimize the impact of the teacher strike on their academic programme and performance:

> *RISUNA: …teachers were striking. So, we had to form a group. So, I was good at maths, there was someone good in physics, biology, agriculture. So, from that group we were teaching each other. From that side we were fine. So, as I'm speaking now, all four (of us) are now university graduates.*

He added that a lot of his classmates made their ways to higher education institutions. Higher education participation out of his school is known to be *"very high…there is a lot of going to University… out of my matric, I think maybe 70%" went to university"*. Some of Risuna's teachers promoted higher education to an extent of collecting higher education funding application form for their learners.

I asked Risuna why there was such a high university aspiration in his secondary school. He replied that a university qualification was one thing all successful people in his community had in common and that remains a major motivation behind him and his school mates' higher education aspirations. He identified lack of accurate and timely information about the application process as a major challenge to their higher education ambitions.

> *I remember back then, I used see the guy that was working at Ford, so when I was checking those guys who you can say these guys have made it in life, most of them went to varsity, so that's where I realized that it means for turning this whole situation around I need to go to university.*

ii. Higher Education Aspirations and Choices

Risuna experienced early career awareness and was always clear about his preferred career path. He tells me that Mechanical engineering was his only choice and he credited this to watching his father fix his own car from which grew his love for *"fixing things"*. In other words, Risuna's choice of field of study was culturally acquired. From this moment Risuna fixated his eyes on mechanical engineering. He explained:

> *RISUNA: Okay, like let me just give you a background of how this thing started…when in grade eight and nine because I was very interested in these mechanics things, I liked fixing things and stuff … I checked, okay I need to do mechanical engineering and then that's why I chose*

maths and science. So, the motive for me choosing mechanical engineering, I wanted to have something tangible to say okay this is what I've done that's innovative and stuff… before they got separated, my father was like fixing his own car. Every time he was doing that I was there, and I still thought this is interesting and then I was always helping him there.

Risuna's choice of Merger University was influenced by an alumnus of the very university during a career exhibition event while he was still in secondary school. He "*met at home, he was working at Ford, so he did mechanical engineering … and during those career exhibitions and stuff … I went and asked him what did you do? Mechanical? And he said he did it at Merger University. That was it and he explained and then I decided I will also try Merger University."*

5.6.3 The Higher Education Experience

Negative Dimensions of Risuna's Higher Education Experience:

i. Involuntary Gap Year

After competing secondary school, despite being accepted to enrol at Merger University, Risuna took an involuntary gap-year due to lack of funds. He had not applied for NSFAS on time. In order to raise funds to cover his university registration costs, Risuna took up part-time work with Statistics South Africa during the 2011 census. The following year, with his confirmation of admission letter in hand, he decided to make his first trip to Johannesburg to enrol at Merger University.

ii. A "tough and scary" landing in higher education

Risuna experienced a "*tough and scary*" landing at Merger University, a reality that delayed his integration into the institution. Despite experiencing early career awareness, he had no knowledge of what to expect upon arrival on campus. His trip to Merger University marked his first trip to Johannesburg, about 500 kilometres away from his humble village. At the back of his tough and scary landing in higher education were his struggles with the transition from being taught in his home language to being taught exclusively in English, the "*big difference"* in teaching practices and

pace between secondary school and university: Risuna explained how he experienced this mismatch:

> *RISUNA: I think let's start from when I get to Merger University because it was my first time coming to Johannesburg and I remember that day when we came, it was a Sunday…. You know there was no doubt in my mind, varsity life and high school life, there's a big difference. You know back in high school they teach you in your home language … these guys are fluent in English, you're not even catching what it is that he's saying. So, you know, it was tough. I think the most challenging thing is just the transition between the way they are teaching in university and then at high school. You know in varsity they can finish a chapter in a day, but in high school a chapter will take maybe a month.*
>
> *Yes, so I think the way they were teaching, it was somehow like fast… you are also scared of asking questions because you want to ask questions and the first thing, you need to construct the question in your mind. If I say this, these people might laugh at me. And the next thing the class is over, and I don't even ask a question… So, you know, I was going home with the same question and I didn't even understand.*
>
> *Another thing…I had a challenge when it came to computer Yes, whereby I just learnt how to switch on the computer at university.*

Positive Dimensions of Risuna's Higher Education Experience:

i. Learning to Learn in Higher Education

Despite experiencing a hard landing at merger University, Risuna managed to adjust and successfully complete his first year of study. Key enablers of adjustment emerge from his narrative.

First, Risuna's academic performance at university significantly improved when he reverted back to the learning approach he adopted during his secondary school days. In his narrative he identified the accumulation of social capital through the formation of study groups with his class mates and developing the courage to consult his lecturers as the key turning points and enablers of his improved higher education experience. He recounted:

RISUNA:…we formed a study group, I think that's where things changed…So, you know, even the people that you're with, even the respect that they give you, they even give you courage okay, now I am at the right gear. There was this guy that was my classmate, so he at least has a light when it comes to computers. Then the other one I think, consulting, it helped me.

Secondly, Risuna identified his ability to learn and understand the course content independently from the teachers to have contributed to his adjustment into the new learning environment. This is the same approach he employed in secondary school when teachers went on strike. He adds that at times he would skip classes and go to the library because an hour spent there was ,for him, a lot more productive than sitting in the lecture theatre through a lecture where *"he didn't hear anything". "I think I'm good at that, to just prepare myself on my own…So, sometimes I will just go to class just to check where they are in the syllabus"*

Thirdly, Risuna identified the critical financial and psycho-social support provided by the Rural Education Access Programme as another key enabling dimension of his higher education experience. REAP, a catholic non profit organisation that acts as a middle man between NSFAS and its intended beneficiaries who otherwise unable to access it, applied for NSFAS funding on Risuna's behalf. REAP also covered NSFAS funding shortfall and provide rural youth with continuous on and off campus support in order to improve rural students' chances of successfully completing their studies at university. Once successfully enrolled as a REAP beneficiary, everything was done for him.

RISUNA: They just give you a person who will look after you if you're having any challenges, you have to speak to that person. Because if you check, most NSFAS students, if you look at their background, at home they don't know what varsity is. So, at least REAP gives you someone at varsity who has been there or is there and knows all the challenges.… I didn't apply for accommodation, a student advisor at REAP did everything for me, I was just going there to sign the stuff…

Looking back:

Towards the end of our interview I asked Risuna what he thinks are some of the reasons behind such a high non-completion rate amongst his fellow working-class students at different South

African universities. He singled out working-class students' lack of support structure as a major contributor to non-completion amongst this group of students.

> *RISUNA: I think first it's the support. I will just give you an example. I remember … the first year passed not even one person at home had an opportunity to come and see where I am staying. But during my second year there was a guy that was my friend, so his dad was visiting like almost every month… Yes, and then I think the other one are the choices that we make because you find, because obviously if I am poor, it is likely that I don't even know what I'm going to do or what I'm going to face at varsity.*

Risuna educational journey and life story **has a happy landing/ending.** He successfully completed his National Diploma in Mechanical Engineering at Merger University. He works as a Coding Technician at ESKOM and is also intending to further his studies alongside his entrepreneurial endeavours.

5.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I presented an analysis of the life stories of five working class graduates who successfully completed their undergraduate studies at three different South African universities: Thabang and Rendani from the well-resourced, elite and former whites-only Ivory Tower University, Lerato and Ranzu from the under-resourced , predominantly working class and former blacks-only Bush University, and Risuna from the comprehensive Merger University. The analysis graduates' life stories sequentially followed key dimensions of participants' *origin and family background*, *their pathways en route higher education* and their *higher education experience and outcomes*. Guided by the research questions, I selected narrative accounts in which participants' voices elucidate key dimensions of a working-class graduate's experiences of completion at different South African universities. I further looked for thematic patterns and relationships between and within participants' narrative accounts, with particular attention given to narratives that diverge from established 'truths' about working-class students' experiences and outcomes in higher education.

Origin and family background

It is believed that attributes of student's communities of origin and family background (i.e. race, class, gender, language group, family income, geographic location, parents educational and occupational status) matters in our quest to deepen our understanding of patterns of educational experiences and attainment. This chapter, therefore, sought answers to the questions: where do these graduates come from? What can we learn about their communities of origin and family background? Who are the important people and institutions during this formative phase in their educational journeys? And what are the key events or moments (Highs, Lows and Turning Points} that helped shape their life and educational trajectories?

Graduates' narrative accounts of their formative years revealed the following themes:

First, they come from rural and township communities. According to Statistics South Africa's 2017 Poverty Trends in South Africa report, the face of persistent poverty and social immobility in South Africa remains largely youth, African, female and of rural and township origin with little to no formal education. Low levels of household income make youth from these communities' eligible beneficiaries of the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). A *Johannesburg Poverty and Livelihoods Study* by De Wet and colleagues (2008) described Thabang's township of Alexandra as:

> "*characterised by high population density and growth rates, elevated levels of unemployment, an age profile skewed towards younger age categories, relatively low levels of education, and low monthly household incomes. The social situation resembles that of other urban townships in Gauteng. Social divisions remain strong, especially between 'old' and 'new' Alexandra residents, wrangling over limited space and opportunities."*

The township of Thembisa, where Risuna lived whilst studying at Merger University, is no different from the above description.

Overall, each graduate's narrative account revealed both positive and negative dimensions their origin and family background. Although participants' narrative accounts are brought together by their similar working-class formative years, they were distinguished by the impact and meanings they each graduate attached to their lived experiences.

Secondly, graduates narrated having endured traumatic formative years and disrupted family circumstances. None of the graduates grew up with both parents. In all cases, their father was either absent or late. Rendani's father was alive but absent, she grew up under the care of her mother, grandmother and elder sister. Similarly, with his father absent, Lerato grew up in his grandparents' house. Ranzu's mineworker father passed away when she was a year old and Risuna's parents were divorced. Thabang experienced a particularly traumatic start to his life story, his mother was stabbed to death when he was one and a half years old.

Thirdly, graduates' narratives illuminate the enabling role of community cultural wealth in working class students' educational journeys. Despite experiencing traumatic and disrupted formative years, graduates' life stories shed light on the enabling role played by what Yosso (2005) referred to as community cultural wealth. Yosso (2005) conceptualizes the working class as communities as endowed with community cultural wealth: "cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged". She advances that marginalized communities nurture cultural wealth through numerous forms of capital that enables its members to navigate seemingly unbearable conditions. These forms of capitals include, but are not limited to, *aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital.*

With his father absent and mother deceased, Thabang's journey to completion was propelled by his grandmother and a retired teacher who ran an orphanage in his village, (whom he refers to as his mother). In this case , Thabang's journey is propelled by what Yosso (2005) called *familial capital*, a form of cultural wealth that challenges traditional understandings of a 'family' , in that it is cultivated by 'extended family' which includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, priests, traditional leaders to the whole community. Similarly, Lerato, a graduate at Bush University, states early in his narrative that *"… where we stay and where we call home is my grandmother's house where my mother's parents stay. So, almost all of us; my uncles, my aunts, we all stay in one house"*. Following disrupted formative years and family circumstances, all graduates were propelled by significant others such as grandparents, aunts, neighbours, orphanages, fellow congregants at church, etc. Participants' life stories not only support the view of working-class communities endowed with community cultural wealth advanced by Yosso (2005), but further elucidate its transformative and enabling effect on their educational journeys.

Fourthly, graduates' backgrounds are similar but far from homogenous.

While this study categorised participating students as working class on the basis of their family background, their narratives reveal that their backgrounds are similar but not homogenous, and that this is an important distinction to make. This study is exploring experiences of completion and non-completion within the category of working-class students and yet it is clear from students' narratives that some are more working class that others, so to speak. NSFAS's use of combined annual household income as the sole determinant for 'working class' eligibility may give the impression that we are dealing with a homogenous group of students. Graduates' narrative accounts put this assumption into question; NSFAS beneficiaries may not be a homogenous group of students and might not be treated as such.

The commonality is that all participants came from families with little to no income and with parents with little to no formal education at all. The difference, however, is that while others are children of mineworkers, farmworkers and domestic workers, others, like Thabang, are orphans and have had to literally scrape the bottom of the barrel in order to get by. While Rendani had a step brother to call when things seemed unbearable at Ivory Tower University, Ranzu , at Bush University, had no one to call.

> *So, where I stayed there was a ground. And what my gran did, she will dig the ground and then separate the soil from the rocks and then sell the rocks as concrete to the trucks. It was small stones. And then you pile them up and then sell it to the truck. And then another thing, you see these guys that are walking on the street with tins and cans and things like that? So, we will sit down, collect them and crush them put them inside bag and then sell those and recycle.* (Thabang, Graduate , Ivory Tower University)

Pathways En route higher education

Beyond their formative years, participants proceeded to narrate their pathways en route higher education. I reconstructed this section of their narrative accounts into three categories of lived experiences: *schooling experiences*, *higher education aspirations* and the *higher education choice process.*

En route higher education, following themes are notable in graduates' narrative accounts:

a. Teachers help navigate under-resourced schooling experiences

Firstly, **all five graduates attended public schools**. Their narrative accounts on schooling experiences reveal realities characteristic of most public schools in South Africa: *under resourced, understaffed, crowded classrooms with inadequate infrastructure and mainly located in rural and township communities.* Although growing, the higher education participation remains "very low", participants said. All of them enrolled in higher education institutions immediately after completing their grade 12 which is the final year of secondary schooling in South Africa.

Secondly, **participants were top achievers at under-resourced schools**. Rendani was ranked second in maths and science stream, earning several top achievers' certificates at school. Thabang excelled so much that he "was one of the kids in class that was very loved by teachers". Ranzu excelled so much at school that she was made to skip grade 9. It is this early academic achievement that enabled them to make universities' steep and ever-rising admission requirements.

In all five cases, graduates identified resourceful and improvising teachers that went beyond the call of duty to help them navigate under-resourced schooling experiences. Where they encountered difficulties at school, graduates recalled *a one or two teachers* they credit for motivating them, having high expectations of them and fuelling their aspirations. After outlining her family background, Ranzu proudly declared that "*I was the bright student at school, so I always came out number one and then I had teachers who always encouraged me*"

Risuna's schooling experience was however divergent from the rest. He recalled experiences of discouraging negative stereotyping and low expectations from some of his teachers. Although he turned his grades around, he identified this experience as one of the early nadir moments in his educational journey.

Thirdly, **all, but Lerato, are first in family to go to university.** Of all participants, Lerato's schooling experiences suggest possession of cultural capital in the 'right' currency. All his grandparents were college graduates who worked as school principals in the village. His mother, although unemployed, is a university graduate. As a university graduate, his mother was empowered to make well considered choices about her child's schooling experiences. For example, while most parents sent participants to public schools located nearest to their village or township, Lerato's mother insisted "…*no my children have to go to a place where the education is in another level*

compared to the village that we come from." Lerato later found out that his mother's attention to detail informed the school choice. *"…when I asked my mum, "Why this secondary school?"* She said, *"Because when you were young you used to draw a lot."* The school not only offered a diverse range of subjects but was also *"one of the top preforming schools around the region"*. Lerato's mother's direct and indirect involvement in his educational journey offers an exception to the deficit understanding on working class parents and their children's schooling experiences.

b. *Road to Higher Education Paved with Stepping Stones And Agents of Transformation*

Despite the evident disparities in their levels of higher education awareness and aspirations, participants made it to university on the back of stepping stones, agents of transformation and serendipities (Arbouin, 2018). A career guidance instructor at an exhibition paved Risuna's path to Merger University and a motivational teacher helped push Ranzu's path to higher education. A retired teacher who runs an orphanage, his grandmother and a caring admissions officer were Thabang's stepping stones en route Ivory Tower University.

Thabang's grandmother, Mrs Sue from the orphanage and the Student Enrolment Officer at Ivory Tower University are key stepping stones that paved Thabang's path to higher education and in many ways his life story. Their role in Thabang's aspirations and transition to higher education fits the profile of people Mills (2008) refers to as "agents of transformation" who "can draw upon a variety of cultural capitals" to disrupt the reproductive cycle in working class students' journey to and through higher education.

Thabang's narration of the influence and role played by these key characters in his journey to Ivory Tower University shines light on the transformative potential of working-class people's "community cultural wealth" and specifically the transformative role of aspirational and familial capital (Yosso, 2005) found in working class communities. Equally important, Thabang's narration of Mrs. Sue's enduring belief in him and how the orphanage environment she provided , "in itself" was "why I was able to then nurture me into the person I've become", sheds important light on the shaping, evolution and transformation of his habitus en route higher education (Crozier and Reay, 2011). According to Bourdieu:

The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms (Bourdieu, 1990: 54)

c. Varied degrees of higher education awareness and aspirations

With regard to higher education aspirations, participants' experiences are varied. On the one end of the spectrum we have Lerato, for whom going to university was considered a natural post schooling destination. He identified three key features of his origins and family background that propelled his higher education aspirations: *being born to a family of college and university graduates,* his *desire to uplift his family from poverty*, and the *influential role of the church*. His grandparents particularly made it clear "*that there is no way we are going to have a family member who is not educated and who will not go to university"* and for as long as he can remember Lerato *"always knew that at some point I will have to go to university"*. This belief was cemented when his older sister qualified to enrol for an extended Bachelor of Commerce degree at Bush University. Lerato's desire to lift the poverty "weight out of my mother's shoulders' as one of the key motivations behind his pursuit for academic excellence at school in order to qualify to go to university.

On the other hand of the spectrum we have Thabang for whom higher education was not within the realm of reality. He was first in a family for whom the idea of him going to university was unreal. As he put it: *"University for them (his family), me to go to any University was out of reality for my family".* Markedly, Thabang states that the notion of going to university being a distant reality is consistent with the very low higher education participation rate in his community where *"university students are so rare they are like something that comes out of a lucky packet"*. He grew up with two sisters, none of whom went to university.

d. The illusion of 'choice' in higher education

Participants' higher education choice process fell within two broad categories: choice of field of study and choice of university.

- **A few made it into their preferred field of study**

With regard to their choice of study: a few of them made it into their "first choice". Their higher education choice process was undermined by lack of career awareness and universities ever-hiking their admission requirements. Although Rendani enrolled for a BSc in Geography and Geology, she confessed that upon enrollment she *"didn't know what geology was"*. Her *"successful"* brother who recommended Ivory Tower University also supported Geology, which happened to be what he studied … *"He (step brother) is doing geology and there is a lot of money"*. Ranzu "always wanted to be a scientist when still at primary", unfortunately she failed to meet the admission requirements for her first choice (BSc in Plant Pathology) and had to settle for her second choice (Environmental Sciences). Similarly, with regard to his *choice of field of study,* Thabang initially "wanted to study Architecture but the marks (grades) didn't allow me". Having failed to meet Architecture's admission requirements and settled for his second choice which was a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology.

In contrast, due to early career awareness, Risuna and Lerato made it into their field of study. Lerato's choice of Urban and Regional Planning as a career of choice was thought out. He took into consideration his "passion" for "technical drawing", his "strengths", alignment with the subjects he was good at in high school and consideration for "scarce skills in our country". He appeared particularly informed about his career prospects and options. He specifically went for a degree that majored in subjects he was good at in high school and avoided degrees that majored in maths and science. Similarly, Risuna experienced early career awareness and was always clear about his chosen career path. He tells me that Mechanical Engineering was his only choice and he credited this to watching his father fix his own car from which grew his love for *"fixing things"*.

- ***"Bush University was not my first choice": 'Choice' of Institution***

With regard to participants' choice of institution, the following dimensions are apparent: first, for virtually every one of them Bush University, a historically black only, grossly under resourced and rural based institution, was not their 'first choice'. It was what they fell back to when rejected by Ivory Tower Institutions for failing to meet the financial or academic admission requirements. Ranzu had the comprehensive Merger University as her first choice, the elite Pretoria University as her second choice and Bush University as her third choice. Ranzu narrated that "*I wasn't planning to come to Bush University. My dream was to go to Merger University or University of Pretoria. Merger*

University I couldn't qualify due to my lower marks in maths and physics." Similarly, when choosing the institution, Lerato chose Bush university because he felt it was "*the only option*" for him.

Overall, participants' institutional destination was underpinned more by considerations and not so much the institution itself. These considerations included for geographic location of the university and its proximity to family in the case of Thabang, failure to meet the academic and financial requirements of preferred institution in the case of Ranzu. Risuna's choice of Merger University was influenced by an alumnus of the very university during a career exhibition event while he was still in secondary school. He explains:

> *Okay, like i remember this guy I met at home, he was working at Ford, so he did mechanical engineering … and during those career exhibitions and stuff … I went and asked him what did you do? Mechanical? And he said he did it at Merger University. That was it…I decided I will also try Merger University.*
> *(Risuna, Graduate, Merger University)*

Lerato ended up at Bush University out of financial considerations. Tuition fee at Bush University is relatively affordable when compared to other HEIs. Additionally, the university's rural location meant the cost of living is lower which makes it easier for students to commute daily from home and avoid the cost of student housing. He explained:

> *LERATO … in terms of choice of choosing a university that I have to go to, it was also limited because of the background that I come from. So, the only option for university was Bush University because of my financial background and my mother's employment status.*

Overall, there is clear evidence of social class reproduction in students' higher education choice process. Its influence is ever present to an extent of rendering the existence of choice an illusion. Due to participants' class position (i.e. where they are born, who they are born to, their community's higher education awareness and participation rate, the presence or absence of role models), some options are simply not available to this group of students. So, although the university application form gives them a first, second and even third choice, the inaccessibility of some options makes the existence of choice to participants questionable.

Key dimensions of graduates' higher education experiences

This section synthesizes graduates' narrative accounts of completion at three different South African Universities. Key themes are categorised into negative (hindering) and positive (enabling) dimensions of their experience in higher education institutions. The objective is by no means to achieve generalizability of experience, but rather to highlight key dimensions or themes that, for me, stand out from how the five graduates narrated their journeys to completion. Given the volume of interview data, and to maintain novelty, I had to restrict myself to the key issues that aligned the most to the research question: How do working class graduates narrate their experiences of completion at different South African Universities?

The first category of themes highlights the negative dimensions of participants' experience in higher education. In this category of themes, graduates' life stories reveal patterns of hinderances collectively experienced. Negative dimensions of participants' higher education experience included: *experiencing a turbulent transition and hard landings on arrival in higher education*; *homelessness*; *distrust and toxic student-faculty relations*; *a poorly administered and mismanaged financial aid programme.*

Despite evident hinderances experienced in their journeys to and through higher education, narrative accounts of the five graduates reveal enabling and transformative dimensions of their experiences at different higher education institutions: First, *they do not arrive empty handed, they bring durable community cultural wealth to higher education* ; second, *their possession and development of a transformative habitus (Mills, 2008) and wealth of aspirational capital (Yosso,2005) propels them over the finish line*; third, *agents of transformation (Mills, 2008) facilitate the accumulation of idealised forms of capital which in turn multiplies their chances of success* (Maurice et al, 2017); fourth, *beyond 1st Year, their journey to completion is a relatively "smooth" one*; and fifth, *in the case of Lerato at Bush university, we notice a positive and successful effect of juggling work and university.*

Notably, graduates attributed the high non-completion rate of working class students, in the main , to a poorly administered and mismanaged NSFAS financial aid programme that , for some , has been more of a curse than a blessing.

Overall, graduates draw from a variety of often overlooked resources and dispositions to aspire, navigate and persist in higher education. They accumulate and convert/translate their largely disregarded wealth of working-class community cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) into idealised or

rewarded forms of capital, they accumulate additional forms of capital when institutional conditions are allowing (Crozier and Diane Reay, 2011) and trade in a manner that multiples their chances of successful completion in an often hostile and violent field of higher education. Forced to adult young, the decisions they take under difficult conditions point to the presence of an enduring, adaptive and transformative habitus (Mills, 20080. For them giving up is not an option. While they are hindered by being a "fish out of water" and their lack of familiarity with both written and unwritten rules of the higher education game, for some, a rare encounter with those who care enough seems enough to get them over the finish line.

The next chapter reports on working-class dropouts' narrative account of non-completion at the three institutions.

CHAPTER 6: Working Class Dropouts' Narrative Accounts of Non-Completion In HE

6.1 Introduction

How do working class dropouts narrate their experiences of non-completion at different South African universities? How can narratives of their lived experiences deepen our understanding of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education? Within the context of efforts to transform and widen participation in higher education, answers to these questions should present opportunities for transformation and further deepen our understanding of the challenge of attrition amongst working class students in higher education.

This chapter presents and analyses narratives of five purposefully selected NSFAS funded working class students who dropped out of university before they could complete their undergraduate studies. Linda (25), Wadzi (19) and Naledi (18) from Merger University. Tali (27) and Martin (26) from Bush University. Merger University is a well-resourced former whites-only Afrikaans speaking urban university that merged with a predominately black Technikon in post-apartheid South Africa. Bush University is a grossly under resourced, predominantly working-class and former blacks-only rural university located rural Limpopo province.

Participants' life stories are organized chronologically to follow their origin and family backgrounds (formative years), pathways en route higher education and their higher education experiences and outcomes. In the end, themes that stand out of each participant's narrative account are brought together to amplify the contribution of voices and insights from the margins in our understanding of completion and non-completion amongst working-class students in higher education.

6.2 LINDA'S STORY

6.2.1 Origins and Family Background

Rurality and disrupted formative years and family circumstances

Linda was born and raised in Nkandla village in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal Province. In his region there is hardly any economic or industrial activity taking place, unemployment levels are high, and the vast majority of households are dependent on subsistence farming and government's social security grants for pensioners and children under the age of 18. Higher education participation rate is, according to Linda, *"very low"*. Neither his parents nor any of his six sisters went to university, making him the first in his family.

By the time Linda was six, his mother left him with his six sisters to work as a domestic worker in Johannesburg, about 600 kilometres from their village. As a single parent with grade 3 as her highest education level, Linda's mother had to travel that far in order to get a job and provide for him and his siblings. His mother sadly passed away on his first year of study at Merger University, leaving him and his sisters orphaned.

As he began narrating his life story, Linda told me an interesting story about a common practice in his community whereby a family without a boy child can borrow a boy from another family to come look after their livestock. He narrates how this practice had both a negative and positive effect on his educational journey and the person he grew up to become. He attributed the struggle of growing up without his mother with initially killing his *"confidence and "self-belief"* but later forming "*some sort of a foundation*" for the resilient person he grew up to become:

> *LINDA: Growing up in a village, like in a rural area where I come from in KZN, there's a culture whereby if your family doesn't have a boy or a young boy to herd and look after them cows and goats, they obviously go somewhere where there are many boys and ask for one boy to say, "okay, we were hoping he could help look out for the cows and everything" and I was one of those boys. I was the only boy in my family but my mom had to come to Johannesburg to work*

and I was young at the time. So, this family offered to take me in and I will look after the cows. So, I lived with that family since I was young. I grew up with them.

This experience also had both negative and positive effect on him:

LINDA: Once you know that you don't belong there, no matter how nice you are treated, no matter how good you are treated, there's always the thing that tells you "but I don't belong here", and it kills your confidence, your everything, because there was never a moment where I was saying I'm going to tell my mom. And when the kids are talking about their moms and dads, my mom is not there. And at a time, I hardly knew her because she was in Johannesburg and I was in KZN. So, it was a struggle, but then again, I would say that formed some sort of a foundation, that's what made me who I am today, as much as I still blame it for killing my confidence…my self-belief and everything…

Linda further recalled how his disrupted family circumstances affected his student identity as well as his sense of belonging. In a way, in Linda's community, herding cattle came first and school second.

LINDA: I got to meet my father when I was seven years old and I was still not allowed to go to school at the time because the school was far and they felt like I was still too young and then when I was eight years old, that's when they took me to school. It was quite far, but then we had to go to school. I mean, sometimes you go there and came there late because you have to first take the cows to bush and then come back, get dressed, then go to school.

And then later on when I was doing Grade 2 , I was introduced to my family at the time and I got to meet with my mom and the rest of my siblings and it was this huge family that I had to connect with because I missed out on a lot when I wasn't with them.

And I remember when I was doing Grade 6 I made up a story that I was sick so that they can take me to go and just live with my family for a while. Which they did … my mom took me and came with me here in Johannesburg where I had to see the doctors and they had to check me and they only validate, they did realise that there was nothing wrong with me. But I got to spend time with my mom and some of my family members, then I was sent back to school.

By the time he reached high school Linda was reunited with his mother and the rest of his siblings . Although he successfully completed secondary education with a B average and therefore met the university's admission requirements, Linda felt he could have done better:

> *LINDA: So, after finishing matric and passing it, I think I did my best there, that was the best, and then that was my best even though I still feel like I could have done better, but that was my best.*

6.2.2 En route Higher education

Improvising and accumulating idealised social , cultural and economic capital en route higher education

En route higher education, Linda narrates how he sought to accumulate the kinds abilities he perceived would be needed upon arrival in higher education. First, was the accumulation cultural capital in the form of computer skills and improving his command of the English language. Having grown up in a community where everybody sounds the same, Linda struggled with the English language upon arrival in Johannesburg. In his village everybody speaks isiZulu, one of South Africa's eleven languages. Linda recounts how he improvised and improved his command of the English language by watching TV**:**

> *LINDA: I came to Johannesburg and I got to meet my mom's boss, and obviously it was a white person and they're speaking English. I knew nothing. I couldn't speak English at the time and I was bothered by the fact that, as they were talking to me, all I did was laugh because I couldn't understand a thing. And when I got to live with my family, there was a black and white TV which helped me to learn English. I took it upon myself to say, let me learn this thing, let me have a vocabulary and try to learn this, and it helped.*

Secondly, upon completion of his secondary education , Linda decided to look for a job first , **accumulate some economic capital** and then pursue his higher education ambitions.

LINDA: So, I decided, because I can't go to varsity, we have no money, maybe go to Johannesburg, look for a job, then later on I will go to University…So, later in 2012, somewhere in June, I got a security job after doing some security courses…I worked from August 2012 until December 2013. I had saved some money but because we're from a poor family, obviously some of the money I get I have to send home so that my mom can live and stuff. So, I did that.

Higher Education Choices and Aspirations

Even though Linda knew no one who had ever been to university and very little about what actually happens at the university , he always wanted to go to university. I asked him why and his response below illustrates how his higher education aspirations were premised on his aspiration to be the vehicle that propels his family's social mobility and perception that only higher education would enable him to play that role.

LINDA: Yes…the only reason I did well in school, I wouldn't say I did well, but the only reason I worked so hard in school was because I wanted to go to varsity so that obviously the only picture you have in your head is to change your family situation, to change those houses that are made of mud and everything and just, you want a better life. You want a better job. You want be that guy who changes the situation from home. You want to make your parents proud. And that was the main reason obviously.

Linda's higher education choice process was largely influenced by the geography of a particular university and less so about the university itself. His initial choice of the University of Kwazulu Natal had to do with his preference of Kwazulu Natal as a his home province as well as being amongst people who mainly spoke Zulu, his home language.

LINDA : …later in 2013 I applied for varsity and I chose Durban, I chose Kwazulu Natal because it's closer to home and obviously I felt like most of the people are Zulus and I'll be there, and I think it's better than being here in Johannesburg.

At the University of Kwazulu Natal Linda's first choice was a degree in Social Work followed by Bachelor of education as his second choice. He believes his choice of field of study had a lot to do with the limited number of careers of people in his village are exposed to growing up.

> *LINDA: And that's our problem with growing up in the villages whereby you're not exposed to certain careers. You're only exposed to the careers that right in front of you, teaching, nursing and social work. And as for teaching, obviously there were teachers and I felt like it's the easiest career to get a job. But then again, I don't like being a teacher, I'm not good at explaining and teaching and everything and that's why I chose to put it as the second choice. But social work, I fell in love with social work because obviously I grew up with it , when my mom was around and she would tell me about his great job that social workers are doing, and from there on it has always been in my head that social workers are doing the greatest job ever, they are doing the most.*

When things didn't work out at the University of Kwazulu Natal, Linda dropped out and moved to Johannesburg to live with his mother in Alexander township. He continued working as a security guard while applying for admission at Merger University. In 2015 he got accepted at Merger University to study Public Management and Governance.

When I asked Linda why Merger University and why Public Management and Governance, his choice of institution was mainly underpinned by the University's proximity to where he worked as a security guard. He attempted to enrol at Ivory Tower University but the *"registration fee was very high"* he chose Public Management and Governance because Human Resource Management and Bachelor of Education , his first and second choice, were both full.

Given his family background, Linda decided he had to work and study at the same time. He explains the thinking behind his choices:

> *I was here in Johannesburg… it was the closest University and I looked at the fact that I can't quit my work and just go to varsity full time. I had to do both so that I can be able to support myself and then be able to take myself to school every day. Because no-one was going to support me. I already knew that. So, Merger University is closer, even though Ivory Tower is closer because it's here in Braamfontein, but then I couldn't afford the registration fee. So, Merger University is a bit cheaper than Ivory Tower University.*

6.2.3 The Higher Education Experience

Negative Dimensions of Linda's Higher Experience:

Dimensions of Linda's higher education experience span across two different Universities in South Africa, the University of Kwazulu Natal and Merger University.

i. Homeless and New in Town

Linda experienced a turbulent transition and hard landing into higher education which was underwritten by a variety of hindering factors. His first hinderance had to do with his uncertain sources of funding and lack of familiarity with the funding opportunities available to people of his socio-economic status. He admits that after completing his secondary education he had no idea what to do next. Due to his funding situation, hardly halfway into the first semester of his first year of study, Linda found himself homeless in a town he knew no one. He explains:

> *LINDA …we {him and his secondary school mates} had no idea on what to do, how to get to varsity. The only thing we were given were application forms…. There were no bursaries and I will tell you now that I was one of the students who didn't know how to apply for NSFAS or if there are any other bursaries except NSFAS.*
>
> *It's funny because I went there (University) , I knew no-one, I had no siblings, I had applied for accommodation but I had to pay some fees, a certain amount of money which I felt like I can't pay because I have to pay monthly. Since I haven't got funding, I can't do that. So, I went there and I have no place to stay. So, I think I spent a week or so living at the taxi rank and going to varsity. It was in the early days of varsity still dealing with the registration.*

ii. Thrown into the deep end: "I had no idea what was expected of me, I knew nothing"

The second dimension of Linda's higher education experience was the complete lack of familiarity with the everyday workings of the university that characterised his transition into higher education and delayed adaptation into his new learning environment. His lack of familiarity with the university culture worsened by his non-existent portfolio of social capital. The excerpt below illustrates how Linda experienced the **first few weeks upon arrival** at the university:

> *MUKOVHE: … when you first arrive at University, what did you know about the University?*
>
> *LINDA: To tell you the truth, I had no idea what was expected of me. I mean, I spent the whole first semester without a tutor. Most students were assigned to tutors and I wasn't because I had no idea there are people called tutors …To tell you the truth, I think the reason why I didn't know about tutors and everything was because I missed out on most of my classes because I was getting lost on campus trying to find classes and everything.*
>
> *I spent like first two weeks without a timetable because you had to make one for yourself. They say you first have to look into a computer and then…I had no idea. So, that's two weeks wasted. I have no idea. I just go there to varsity, look around, geez, I don't know what's going on, until some of the students helped me create one. I didn't know about the tutors and everything as most of the students were assigned to tutors and that was the most painful part, knowing that someone could have helped me with other things, but I had no idea.*

iii. The language constraint: "…it was a different experience for me having to hear someone trying to teach me in English throughout the lecture"

Inside the classroom, Linda's struggle with the English language hindered both his confidence and ability to engage with the what was being taught. It was particularly challenging for him to transition from having been taught mainly in his home language in school to the university where lectures were delivered exclusively in English. The fear of being mocked because of his limited command of the English language meant he could not even ask clarity seeking questions in class. He explained the frustration:

> *LINDA: And now that I got to varsity, my first lecture was in English. There I was struggling to understand, even scared to ask questions because obviously I was nervous that my English is*

not, I might get laughed and everything. And I was kind of shy at the time and it was a different experience for me having to hear someone trying to teach me in English throughout the lecture. And it was just difficult, because I couldn't ask questions and I was there trying to hold those words that were difficult to me, trying to jot them down so that I can later on get some sort of explanation and definitions on that.

The English problem also weakened Linda's ability to mobilise and accumulate much needed social capital and access student support services, a reality that further hindered his transition period.

LINDA : It was hard for me to make friends at the time. I don't know why, but I couldn't make friends. It took me some time to make friends and by then I feel like it was already late because I had missed out on a lot of things. And I think University was just confusing for me. I mean, there were buses that I didn't even know about them, the bus is taking students from varsity to town… I would have saved a lot but I didn't know about that. It was just confusing. I only caught up on the second semester because then I managed to get friends and then they helped me around campus and they helped me around other things that I didn't know about.

iv. Lost in a crowd:" you got to figure it out yourself"

While struggling to find his foot on campus, Linda found the institutional culture to be *"strict", "rough" and "confusing"*. Thrown in the deep end, he felt *"university has no time*" for someone with his slow pace of figuring things out, pace of learning, weak knowledge of technology, etc. Lost in the crow Linda found the first year of study *"very very rough and confusing"*.

LINDA: I would say that university is so strict and it's even confusing if you're a first-time student in varsity. It's so confusing. Like you get lost and no-one will help you. It's like you are there to study, so you got to figure it out yourself. They don't care if you know the University life or not, you're just there to study. You have to know everything fast and it wasn't easy for me.

So, I was still struggling using emails, I remember that was the first time of having an email and I didn't know that the communication in varsity is done through emails, then even if you're going to have a test, you're going to be told via email and everything is like that. I created my email, but

I hadn't checked it and only to find out that when I asked, when I was talking to some of the kids that I was in class with, they were like, "we were writing a test yesterday", and I'm like where and when, how? They told me that they told us through email and that was the first time I opened my emails and only to find out that I've missed two of the tests because I wasn't able to use email and email was just a nuisance for me. So, that was a struggle and I had to catch up with that and I had to catch up with some of the modules obviously and I was struggling a lot. The first year was very very rough and confusing. You have to know everything all by yourself and it was quite confusing.

Linda found the university **to be impatient and quite isolating to struggling students** like him. He constantly sought to highlight to me the evident gap between his learner and cultural identity and the university's expectations of him:

LINDA: And that was, it was so difficult. I mean… they have no time for excuses, they have no time to hear your side of the story. They want you to be there, they want you to be serious. In fact, when you go to varsity it's like you need to grow up. I don't know, they expect you to be this responsible individual who knows it all, who's capable of catching up fast and who's able to, I don't know, to be responsible enough to be there.

v. Down but not out

When Linda's funding ran out, he was forced to leave the university at the end of his first year of study. He did not quit his higher education altogether, instead he went back to work as a security guard in Johannesburg, saved some money and enrolled at Merger University the following year.

LINDA : And then I ran out of money. I spent a week not going to school until I called my mom and told her, no, let us discuss, I can't do it, I have to come back come because I've run out of money, and she was like, "okay, cool, you can do that because I cannot support you either".

Then this was the only option to drop out and I can't live here where I have no family and I have no money, so it's better to be in Johannesburg closer to my family and go to a nearer University… I got one and I tried to save some money which I did, but then obviously because my mom was still around, I had to support her.

vi. Let down by the National Students Financial Aid Scheme

Having enrolled for a degree in Public Management and Governance at Merger University, Linda was failed by the National Students Financial aid scheme. With his mother late, Linda's household income was now zero. NSFAS' administrative deficiencies over the past years has resulted in the scheme approving more students that it had funding available, and Linda became one of the victims of this ineptitude. He cries about how his NSFAS funding application status remained "provisionally funded" throughout the year and yet his tuition debt remained on his student account at Merger University. He explains:

> *I was provisionally funded and by then it was around March. It was around this time when I went to ask them, and they told me that I was provisionally funded, but then because of the fact that the funding was not enough, they couldn't fund us. But it was provisionally funded, we had already qualified for funding, but we can't get it because there's not enough funds.*

As a result, Linda's higher education journey crash landed due to NSFAS's administrative deficiencies. Despite his funding constraints, Linda continued attending classes at Merger University under the hope that NSFAS would eventually come through. It did not. At the end of the academic year Linda's academic records were withheld and he was denied registration the following academic year due to "outstanding fees". And that is how Linda was pushed out of the field of higher education.

Towards the end of our interview, I asked Linda to look back at his higher education experience and identify that which he wishes he knew about university prior to admission. He wished he known about the significance of "*orientation week"* in aiding transition into higher education, he wished he had made friends earlier and he wished he had known about the help offered by university tutors.

> *LINDA: I wish I managed to attend the orientation whereby I was going to be able to understand the campus better. But I couldn't be there because I was from far and*

obviously, I had to find a place to stay, which I failed to get, and I missed out on the orientation. But I wish I had understood the campus better, I had known most of the things about the campus life and what was expected of me as a student. And I wish I was able to make friends earlier and I wish I had a tutor.

6.3 WADZI'S STORY

6.3.1 Origins And Family Background

Turbulent and Traumatic Formative Years

Wadzi experienced turbulent and traumatic formative years. She was born and raised in Hillbrow, a largely degenerated and working-class section of the city of Johannesburg, roughly 20 minutes away from Merger University by bus. Her parents separated when she was in grade 1 and her mother passed away when she was in grade 3. Before her passing, Wadzi's mother worked as a security guard. Being the only child at home meant that she remained alone with her father. Her father sold food to manual labourers for a living in order to pay rent and send Wadzi to school.

She characterised the higher education participation rate in from school as "very low" with some of the girls she grew up having fallen pregnant and dropping out of secondary school. She recalls how, out of the nine girls in her social group, she was the only one who made it into higher education, with the majority of the girls dropping out before completing secondary school. Neither of Wadzi's parents went to university, her mother completed grade 12 and stayed at home, the highest grade her father reached was grade 7.

6.3.2 En Route Higher Education

i. Schooling Experience

Wadzi attended school in the CBD of Johannesburg. Despite her school being severely under-resourced, Wadzi "*never saw it as a problem"*. She remembers being *"a very smart student"* at her school.

> *WADZI: It was a school, but then now that I know how a school should look like, I can recall that the environment was very bad. We'd have a hall and then it's divided by boards…you can actually hear what other people are actually also saying. So the environment was very poor, now that I know. But then I never saw a problem. I'm like, it's a school, it's a school.*

At this stage Wadzi recalled lack of parental involvement in her schooling as one of her nadir memories about her schooling experience. With her mother late, her father struggled to be involved in her schooling due to his demanding work as a hawker in the busy China Town part of Johannesburg. He would miss parents' meetings , leaving her to rely on her friends' parents. Despite his lack of involvement in her schooling, knowing that her father is hustling for her made her appreciate him the most. She proudly describes her strong and positive relationship with her father:

> *So my relationship with my dad, it's that relationship, I now take him as my, he's be my best friend. He's my mum, he's my whatever. Yes, so he's always been there for me. So he would buy everything. Even when I'm not there, he'd go shopping or anything for me. So I'm not there, okay, he'd buy me stuff. Like even clothes, he knew the kind of style*

ii. Higher Education Aspirations and Choices

Wadzi's narrated how her school not only motivated them but further created a conducive environment for them to aspire to access higher education. The school did not only make

resources available but made it mandatory for everyone in grade 12 to apply for at least one university. Her computer studies teacher made it compulsory to apply to university… *"it was compulsory to apply. Even if you're failing you must, everyone was supposed to apply for university"*. The same teacher cancelled sports for grade 12 learners in order to invest more of their time on improving their grades in order to maximize the learners' chances of meeting universities' admission requirements.

With regard to the higher education choice process, Wadzi resisted her father's expectations for her *"to choose subjects that are more sophisticated… like sort of sciences, life sciences and everything"*. Wadzi's excellent grades in grade 10 tourism enabled her to convince her father to follow tourism as a career path. Her exposure to modelling whilst at school gave her early career awareness which made it relatively easy for her to select a field of study when applying to higher education.

She aligned her career path to what she perceived to be her strengths: *"communication and working with people"*. Due to her communication skill, Wadzi was elected head girl during her final year of secondary school. She *"always had everything figured out"* from the time she was in secondary school. The following excerpt from our conversation shows Wadzi's higher education choice process (Reay, 2001) and how from a young age she had her sight on the aviation hospitality industry.

> *WADZI: My first choice has always been tourism, cause I knew that I wanted to be an air hostess.*
> *MUKOVHE: So you had everything figured out quite early?*
> *WADZI: Yes, I've always had everything figured out.*
> *MUKOVHE: why tourism?*
> *WADZI: I love working with people so so much and I love travelling…Yes, I love people, I love communication and I love providing everything. I want to make sure that wherever people are, everyone is good. So that's what I love. I don't like paperwork and everything. So even in school, everything to do with communication and things, they knew I was gonna nail it.*

Wadzi's choice of Merger University was underpinned by its proximity to her neighbourhood

of Hillbrow, avoiding the cost of accommodation away from home and her father's fear that she was too young to study outside of her home province of Gauteng. During the application process Wadzi cast her net as wide as possible and this significantly increased her chances of making it into higher education. She applied to four different universities online at her schools' computer lab. The lab had marketing material about all universities in the country as well as guidelines on how to apply for the National Students Financial Aid Scheme.

Another reason Wadzi chose Merger university was to limit the loan portion of her NSFAS funding upon completion. She felt that "Merger University was more affordable than the other ones". At the time Wadzi applied for NSFAS funding the award was 60% loan and 40% grant. This changed in 2018 when the South African Government phased out the loan portion of the funding and began phasing in fully subsidised free higher education beginning with 2018 new entrants from families earning below R350 000 per annum. S

6.3.3 **The Higher Education Experience**

Dimensions of Wadzi's Higher Education Experience:

i. A hard landing into higher education

Wadzi experienced a particularly hard landing at Merger University from which she never recovered. Central to her challenging start to the academic year and essentially an overarching dimension her overall higher education experience is the poor administration and mismanagement of NSFAS funding at the Merger University. Despite having applied for NSFAS funding on time whilst in grade 12, upon arrival at Merger University, Wadzi had to join a long que of working class students whose funding status remained *"provisionally funded"* at the time when they needed *"NSFAS firm offer letters"* before they could be allowed to register at the University. As the administrative process dragged out, her father scrambled the R3000 registration fee in order to secure her space in her preferred Bachelor of Arts in Tourism Management, while they wait for NSFAS to clear the que of provisionally funded students. This he did because while working class students queued for NSFAS process, self-funded students continued to register for unoccupied

spots across faculties.

Once registered at Merger University, Wadzi's transition into higher education continued to be haunted by her outstanding NSFAS funding status. She could not measure her academic progress because the university, as part of their standard practice, withheld the grades of students whose tuition fee was outstanding.

> *WADZI: So first semester when we wrote our exams and then the marks came out and I never saw my marks cause I never paid. So now I'm still waiting for NSFAS. I went to the NSFAS offices, no-one seemed to be willing to explain to me what exactly is going on. They're telling me come back next week, maybe you'll get your feedback…*

Despite the funding setbacks Wadzi and her father persisted. With her midyear grades withheld, her father encouraged her to continue writing examinations and grading herself, he said "*just estimate yourself*". She added that *"I myself, I would write tests and I could say I think that's a sixty, sixty-five, and I would get sixty".*

Wadzi's father possessed none of higher education's idealised forms of capital. Having left school in grade 7, all he could give to Wadzi was emotional support. She recalled how, when it came to the everyday workings of the University, her father *"never understood what exactly was going on".* All her father knew is that Wadzi struggled with certain courses.

> *WADZI: I told him, you know what, I am doing anthropology. He was like "what is that?" Then he asked me, "what is anthropology?" I'm like, the study of human kind. "Study of human kind? Why are you now studying human kind?... Are you not supposed to be doing hospitality?"*

Wadzi's higher education experience went from bad to worse when her father lost his trading licence as a hawker in China City. In addition to her funding challenge, Wadzi struggled adjusting into the university's institutional culture. Although she had no trouble adjusting to the academic programme of the university, she recalls how she "*was always lost"* due to the sheer size of her campus at Merger University. Her struggling to make friends meant delayed adjustment to the overall day to day functioning of the university.

WADZI: I was so lost…I was always lost…a lot of times I'd forget where my class is. I think my first semester was the worst.

ii. Pushed out by NSFAS Funding: You can't count on it.

Towards the end of her first academic year at Merger University, Wadzi and the rest of NSFAS provisionally funded students were informed that NSFAS at Merger University has run out of funds and that they must try the following year. This effectively pushed Wadzi out of the university. The following year her NSFAS funding was once again approved but she was prevented from registering until she cleared her outstanding tuition fee of the previous academic year. Unable to come up with the money Wadzi was forced to drop out of Merger University. Until this day she has no idea how she performed academically in bother her first and second semester examination as her grades remain withheld due to outstanding fees.

The University's refusal for Wadzi to register for her second academic year left her father particularly devastated. "*So my dad was sick and tired of explaining to people. So he was quite disappointed. At some point I think he felt like he's failing."*

Their disappointment was worsened by how, whilst in ques for help at NSFAS offices on campus, Wadzi recalled witnessing fraud, favouritism and general disorganisation. A class mate informed her of a guy who was helping students secure NSFAS funding provided she brought a R1 000 bribe. She failed to raise the bribe amount and the girl who paid the bribe was sorted…*" she went there and then now she's studying; she's doing her third year. She's doing her third year, she got NSFAS".*

Today, given her experience with NSFAS at Merger University, Wadzi is not just disappointed that her educational journey crash-landed , she wants nothing to do with NSFAS.

WADZI: …I'd say with my experience, even if I hear NSFAS, even if they say with NSFAS you don't have to pay the money back, I just don't want anything to do with

it. If someone says NSFAS, I think corruption, I think of favours…it's quite very low and you can't count on it. You can't even count on NSFAS. Don't trust it.

iii. Not an isolated incident: "we all have our own stories to tell."

WADZI: … some people even think of committing suicide because they're failing.

Wadzi was not an isolated incident, she narrates how her experience of being forced out of the university due to NSFAS's administrative deficiencies was shared by a number of students at Merger University. When I asked her if she had any positive memories at Merger University, she mentioned how realising that she was not the only one suffering changed her perspective.

WADZI: I discovered that my problems were not even big problems. When I go to talk to people , there was this girl that said, "I'm coming from KZN, then NSFAS is telling me that they can't provide anything for me cause now I'm on the waiting list ... So I'm here. So she would sleep in campus without anyone knowing and then she would wake up {and attend class}. So it changed this perspective of me viewing people that I see around.

People thought of bad things, some people even think of committing suicide because they're failing. So one's mum was working as a domestic worker and then she failed, she failed dismally, she could see her results, she didn't have a NSFAS bursary that will pay, and then she failed, and then at some point she thought of taking her life because she can't face the disappointment. So I knew that in varsity, not everyone there is excellent…we all have our own stories to tell.

iv. "oh, so you dropped out"? The trauma and shame that follows dropping out

Towards the end of our interview Wadzi narrated a dimension of higher her education experience that follows her beyond the walls of the university. The stigma of having

"dropped out" haunts her and her father with some bordering on mocking her. She recounted experiences where people ask her *"oh, so you dropped out? People don't even want to hear about my story".* At this point I reassured her that this is precisely one of the reasons behind this study, to give a chance to voices that matter but are often overlooked.

Looking Back

I asked Wadzi for her perspective on why the non-completion rate amongst working class students remains so high and what can be done about it.

> *WADZI: …So the first factor, finance, I think it contributes quite a lot… I think NSFAS needs to plan their things… So I think they need to improve communication… So we need more branches of NSFAS cause we've got quite a large number of students. You can't tell me ten people in an office can accommodate how many students are using NSFAS?*

The NSFAS funding's administrative chaos experienced by Wadzi and many others in her narrative became one of the primary contributors to the annual student protest across the higher education sector. These became known as #FeesMustFall protests. In response to the demands of the students ,on December 16th 2017, the South African government reformed the whole higher education funding model, including the restructuring of NSFAS.

6.4 NALEDI'S STORY

6.4.1 Origins and Family Background

Naledi (18) was born in Orlando , the first of the South Western Townships (Soweto) to be established by the apartheid government in 1931. Orlando settled the first wave of black South Africans forcibly removed by the apartheid government from rural parts of the country to serve as cheap migrant labour in Johannesburg. The forced removals and super exploitation of blacks

was made possible by the Native Groups Areas Act of 1923, enacted specifically to control the spatial, social, economic, and political lives and mobility of all racial groups in South Africa.

Naledi's community of Orlando embodies South Africa's history of resistance to racial and class injustice. In the late 1970s, Orlando Township was at the heart of the struggle against apartheid laws. Most notable were the June 1976 Youth uprisings where black students led historic demonstrations against an unjust high school curriculum introduced by the apartheid government. In post-apartheid South Africa, with the Native Group Areas Act a thing of the past, Orlando Township remains almost exclusively black and working class. Her community of origin in many ways embodies the social, economic, cultural and political past, present and foreseeable future of the black working classes in this former labour reserve.

At home, Naledi grew up with both parents and four of her siblings. Neither of her parents attended university, they both left the education system after completing grade 12*,"but then they were not able to get stable jobs"* she says. While her mother toiled as a hawker in Orlando and her father works as a security guard in rural Limpopo province, about 500 kilometres from home. The distance between her father's place of work and her Township of Orlando led to Naledi being raised in a family largely looked after by her mother.

6.4.2 Pathways En Route Higher Education

i. Schooling Experiences

> *NALEDI: "We stayed in a (township) kind of location whereby people there, few of them succeed you know and most of them drop out, not in University, but at high school.*

Naledi attended both primary and secondary school in Orlando , a stone throw from her home. She recalls a particularly crowded grade 12 with over 200 learners in her final year of secondary school. University attendance in her community is as low as *"maybe 10%"* she estimates. She attributes the low higher education participation in her community to the high dropout rate in high school amongst her peers. Despite the low higher education participation in her community,

Naledi was not *"first in her family"* to make it to university, her brother recently graduated from Merger University, making him one of the very few graduates in her community.

En route higher education Naledi narrates how a combination of the constant gaze from her mother's strict parental involvement in her schooling and her pursuit for *"independence"* from her parents' curfew propelled both her good grades and her higher education aspirations.

> *NALEDI: My mother, she used to sell where I used to school. It was boring and I was so grounded for the rest of the three years … because anything I do, they tell my mother. Anything I do, they tell my mother. So, I was that type of student that if maybe I drop on my marks, they tell my mother. So, they always wanted me to be that A student and I think I did well in my matric because of that, because I was like the only way to get out of this, it's for me to pass my matric and, you know…*

ii. Higher Education Aspirations and Choices

NALEDI: "University…it was part of my dreams"

Naledi always saw university as a logical step for herself and behind her higher education aspirations was the pursuit for social mobility for her and her family. University *"it was part of my dreams" …I wanted to be a better person, get a stable job and afford to change my situation at home and all that".* Notably, Naledi was particularly confident about her grades meeting the basic admission requirements at Merger University's. Consequently , with her graduate brother, she only applied to Merger University *"because I knew I was going to be admitted, because I knew my academic status. I just applied only at Merger University".*

Her brother also helped her apply and secure NSFAS funding for her undergraduate studies. His degree was also funded through NSFAS funding.

Naledi selected Merger University because it "*is not far from home and my brother went there".* Merger University is located a few kilometres from her home in Orlando township. Her choice of Bachelor of Education was mainly influenced by her passion for working with kids and perceived employment prospects and job security that comes with a teaching career.

MUKOVHE: So, why teaching?

NALEDI: I will be honest, number one, teaching, it's not hard to find jobs and once you're hired, you're hired. Like you see such things, and besides that I am passionate with kids. I'm good with kids. I'm not short-tempered. I'm always willing to help.

6.4.3 NALEDI'S HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

Dimensions of Naledi's Higher Education Experience:

i. A Relatively Smooth Landing into HE

Naledi experienced a relatively smooth transition into higher education. Successfully applying for both university admission and NSFAS funding accurately and on time facilitated her smooth transition. Her NSFAS funding package covered her tuition fee and accommodation costs. She identified her graduate brother as a key individual in this process. Not only did he graduate from the same university she was headed to, but his studies were also funded by NSFAS, which gave Naledi an upper hand.

Despite a largely smooth transition, Naledi's experience upon arrival at Merger University was not without hiccups. Her NSFAS funding did not cover the cost of food. Although she mentions this in her narrative, she understated its impact on her transition into Merger University

Additionally, upon arrival at Merger University, instead of feeling out of place Naledi found the difference between her community of origin and the new social field "*refreshing*". I asked her to elaborate on this:

NALEDI: it's always good to be on a different environment and to be in an environment whereby it's different from the one you grew up from. So, it was a refreshing environment
MUKOVHE: Can you explain a bit more?
NALEDI: People there, it's like ... It is different. You get to meet new people and your mindset tells you that people whom you are with now are people on the same level as

yours, meaning everybody who's there, their aim is to succeed. I believe nobody would have ambitions to go there just for fun maybe or they find pleasure with their usual background.

ii. Dropped and Financially Excluded at First Year of Study

Despite experiencing a relatively smooth landing at merger university, due to her lack of familiarity with computers and online assessments, Naledi missed critical online based assessments. This adversely affected her academic performance during the first semester. Once relatively settled, she bounced back during the second semester and passed all her modules. However due to her poor performance during the first semester, her annual average fell below 50%.

Consequently, despite her intention to continue with her studies, Naledi's higher education experience was tragically cut short when she was *"financially excluded"* by the National Students Financial Aid Scheme for failing to meet the minimum required academic performance for progression. As a matter of policy, NSFAS requires all beneficiary students pass at least 50% of their modules each academic year in order to qualify for continued funding, a requirement Naledi failed to meet at the end of her first year of study. When she returned for registration the following year, the system indicated that she was *"financially excluded"* by NSFAS and therefore no eligible to register until she has paid the registration fee herself. She failed to raise the cost of registration and that marked the end of her higher education journey at Merger University.

It is important to specify that Naledi did not "withdraw" or "pull out" of her studies or the university , and neither did Merger University push Naledi out of the university. NSFAS, as her sole source of funding, withheld the funding which prevented her from being able to register and continue with her studies. Her family was unable to raise funds for her to continue.

iii. Looking back

"if I had started good, I would end up good, but it was too late to cover up"

Despite having not voluntarily dropped out of the university, when reflecting on the

tragic end to her studies, Naledi mainly looked inward for what she perceived to be hinderances behind her experience of non-completion in higher education. Towards the end of our interview Naledi identified a delayed change in her "attitude" towards university as a major hinderance.

> *NALEDI: My attitude from first semester to second semester, it was totally different. That second semester it was like so progressive, showing that if I had started good, I would end up good. But it was too late to cover up…So, second semester I was serious, and I passed all the modules.*

Towards the end of our interview I visited my prompt questions to gain a clearer understanding of what Naledi believes could have aided her negotiation with the field of higher education. I began by asking her about the kind of resources she wishes she had accumulated en route higher education. Naledi wished she "…*had known that University is actually a bigger version of high school whereby you become an independent somebody, whereby you have to seek for information on your own"*. She added that the negative impact of this gap in knowledge on her higher education experience could have been reduced if she had undergone more effective *"orientation"* and *"induction*" upon arrival at the university. Naledi further perceived her lack of prior knowledge about the institutional culture of universities to have significantly contributed towards her academic integration. For her, it was a sad case of a little too late.

To end our interview, I asked Naledi about her future plans since she has been finically excluded from Merger University. Her plan is to reapply to a different University. She is afraid that reapplying to Merger University will result in her funding application being declined. She is confident that, should she be admitted by her new choice of university, she will be able to complete her degree.

For now, Naledi's higher education experience crashes into a tragic end of noncompletion. Her story becomes yet another chapter in persistent dropout bloodbath of NSFAS funded working class students in South African higher education.

6.5 TALI'S STORY

6.5.1 Origins and Family Background

Tali's story begins in Tshilungoma village, her place of birth in the predominately rural Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. Her village, situated a mere 7 Kilometres from Bush University, has *"very low"* levels of higher education participation among the youth, unemployment rate is higher than the national average and families mainly rely on government social security grants, subsistence farming and proceeds from informal trading activities in the stagnant local town of Thohoyandou (Statistics South Africa, 2019).

Early in her narrative, Tali opened up to paint a picture of both her humble beginnings and her absent father. She is the only child at home and her single mother dropped out of school in Grade 12 to work as a domestic worker in nearby villages for most of her life. She has maintained no relationship with her absent father:

> *TALI: I was born into a poor family, actually ever since I was born, like I never knew my father. I found out about my father when I was in secondary of which even though I found out about him was no use, he was useless actually. I can say that. I just asked my mom, who's my father? And stuff like that and then she told me.*

Interestingly, Tali acknowledges her humble beginnings but immediately shrug off its significance to her educational journey, while projecting firm confidence in her academic ability.

> *TALI: Even in primary school, I'm that person who grew up with my own mother , she was struggling, I could see whatever she was going through, you see… but that actually didn't affect me in my education because I was very much clever, if I can say. I was one of the students who was actually clever. Even in my primary school, I never failed. From A to Grade 7 I never failed. I was a good learner, if I can say that.*

It is at this stage of her narrative that I began probing to gain access into how she perceives her schooling experiences and how such experience relates to her overall educational journey. Tali's projection of her sense of self-awareness, control and confidence in her academic ability endures

throughout her narrative of her educational journey as a strategic resource that she constantly draws from.

6.5.2 Pathway En Route Higher Education

i. Schooling Experiences: Encountering Teachers that go beyond the call of duty

Tali proudly remembers being *"one of the top students"* in secondary school. Her status as a top achiever not only strengthened her higher education aspirations but further attracted the attention of teachers who saw potential in her. During her final year of high school, cognisant of Tali's potential, her under resourced family background and possible disruptions to her final examination preparations, one particular teacher left nothing to chance:

> *TALI: In Grade 12, one of my teachers stayed with me… he wanted to support me because he knew that I'm a serious person but due to my situation , he thought that it might affect me, you see. So he ended up taking me so I stayed with him at his place and then I studied there and did all the things. After that I passed my Grade 12…*

Tali's schooling experience shines the light on teachers who, despite teaching in severely under resourced and overcrowded schools, go beyond the call of duty and adopt the role of agents of transformation in order to improve both their learners' schooling experiences and their prospects en route higher education. She identified one of her teachers as a role model that enabled early career awareness.

> *TALI: From primary I used to say I want to be a doctor. Sometimes I would say, I want to be a teacher. There was this other woman, she was like a mom to me, I admired her so I ended up saying I wish I was you. She was very much supportive that one.*

ii. Higher Education Choices: "I just wanted to go to school*".*

Despite the lack of role models in her family, for Tali, university was the logical step after completing her secondary schooling. She narrates how her desire to *"make her mom very proud"* and her dream to one day being called *"doctor"* to have particularly propelled her higher education

aspirations. She proudly pointed at one of her *"top achiever certificate"* from high school hanging on her wall as evidence of her proud history of academic excellence at school.

> *TALI: Back then I was a focused person, like I was very much focused and I had a goal to be something in my life and due to my family background, I wanted to make my mom very proud because of me. But that's one thing that led me to being serious so I wanted to be something else in life. I wanted to be something that this village, my family, my mom can be proud of. Ja, so that's why I was very much focused. I was very much serious…*

She applied for admission to multiple universities including Bush University and Ivory Tower University. When I asked about her choice of degree and institution, her response illustrated the ever-present influence of her working classness in her "choices" and how class subverts the very notion of the existence of choice in the first place. Importantly, although her working class background did not limit the choices visible to her, it did limit the choices available and accessible to her.

> *"I took Social Work because it had a bursary… I just wanted to go to school."*

Although she ended up enrolled for a Bachelor of Social Work as Bush University, Tali's first choice was to study Medicine at Ivory Tower University. She was admitted for her first choice at Ivory Tower University but forfeited her space when she could not raise the registration fee. She explained that:

> *TALI: I applied to the different universities like even Ivory Tower University and stuff, even Bush University. After that at Ivory Tower university I received a letter where I was admitted but then I was supposed to pay, I think, registration fee but I didn't have that money. So I ended up staying at home. I must just cancel it because I don't have this money.*
>
> *At Bush University I took Social Work as my first choice I think. As second choice I think it was LLB. Third choice was teaching, if I'm not mistaken … I didn't know about other courses because I was too young. I was young and I didn't have anyone to help me. So I just decided, let me go and do this Social Worker thing because of the bursary, that was my aim.*

It is common for NSFAS funded students forfeit space in their degrees and institutions of choice due to delayed NSFAS funds allocations at the beginning of the academic year. While they wait for outcomes for their NSFAS funding applications, self-funded students pay registration and secure their preferred degree programmes and institutions. The excerpt above illustrates how for Tali's working classness and NSFAS's administrative deficiencies and delays contributed to effectively undermined her higher education choices en route higher education.

6.5.3 The Higher Education Experience

Key dimensions of Tali's higher education experience:

i. Fish out of Water? "You know university is not like high school…you are on your own"

Despite the university being a stone throw from here village, Tali's transition period at Bush University matched the experience of a *"fish out of water".* She knew no one at the university and had little knowledge of what to expect. She found everything about the university to be worlds apart from her schooling experience:

> *TALI: You know university is not like high school…**at university you are on your own**… it was a challenge because I was used to secondary lifestyle where you just run to your teacher but here you don't run to anyone, you're on your own. So that's one thing I struggled with.They teach less and you do more at university. They will like just show you this and that and now you have to go and study hard on your own. Sometimes you have to find out about something which the lecturer didn't even tell you about but now you have to struggle on your own. Unlike high school, high school they tell you everything. Take notes, go and read, come and write, you pass.*

Apart from her struggle with the university's teaching methods being worlds apart from those in high school, Tali's transition was further hindered by her inability to afford the basic necessities. Her NSFAS funding only covered tuition fee and she had to commute from home daily. Consequently, she struggled to afford basics like toiletries. Being a commuting student also made her feel like an outsider inside the university. She added *'I don't even have a laptop …I had to pay*

to do my assignments and all that. I had to pay for it, for someone to type my assignments and stuff. It was not easy." Despite the transitional hinderances experienced during her first year at Bush University, Tali managed to pass and proceed to her second year of study.

ii. Failed, not Finished

During her 2nd year of study Tali's her higher education experience took a sudden turn for the worst when she experienced what appears to be mental health related issues. She recalls experiencing an imponderable sudden loss of interest in her studies, the results of which culminated in her missing most of her classes. She was traumatised and suicidal. She narrates the trauma of being laughed at by her class mates for failing to qualify for her exams:

> *TALI: It was challenging. People would laugh at me. You see i was not going to classes and stuff. Like when people were qualifying and you weren't qualifying to go to exam. And you know they used to place names on the wall, you see your name is not there, you're not qualified. Everyone could see "she's not qualifying so she's not writing". Even those that I thought were my friends were busy laughing at me.*

Having failed more than 50% of her modules in her second year of study, Tali's NSFAS funding was discontinued and she was prevented from registering for her third year of study at Bush University.

To end our interview, Tali explained her future plan to one day return to complete her degree and one day be called 'Dr". She acknowledges her failure but insist that this is not the end of her educational journey. She insists on one day earning a degree in order to make her *"hero"* mother proud.

6.6 MARTIN'S STORY

Origins and Family Background

Martin (26) dropped out of Bush University during his first year of BA in Criminal Justice.

He was born in Leratong Township in Gauteng Province and moved to a village in Venda just before his primary school. Martin and his six siblings were raised by his mother, his father was absent. His mother dropped out of school in grade 11 and worked as a domestic worker.

> *MARTIN: We had our ups and downs, but it made us stick together as a family. Sometimes you come back home and there is no food, you have to go out and find some food. I took up some part time work so that I can assist my siblings and for them to go to school.*

En Route Higher Education

Schooling experiences

Martin "was very happy at school", thanks to a group of six friends he met and formed a study group with:

> MARTIN: "*I have to thank my friends, whenever I was with them they always spoke about school, they made me feel like we are in the same level , even if we come from different backgrounds… I had a group of six , it was very fun, we helped each other a lot. In 2013 that's when I was in grade 12, I actually spent more of my time at school than at home. I would wake up at 6 and go to school and then come back home let's say 5 o'clock and then eat, take a bath and then go back to school and come back at 11:00-12:00 at night, until I passed my matric".*

Martin spent more time at school than at home due to overcrowding at home, *"I didn't have space to study, so I had to wake up early and come home late studying at school".* His approach was complimented by his school's strict focus on improving the grade 12 results in order to increase the chances of

their students making it to university. Of the group of six friends Martin had, four of them are university graduates now, the other two are working. They are very successful.

Higher Education Choices:

With regard to his choice of university , Martin applied to three universities: the elite Stellenbosch University and North West University and the predominantly working-class Bush university. Behind his choice of Stellenbosch and North West University was his belief that "they are more adequate than Bush university, their education is very high I wanted to get some competition, that was the reason I chose those two … but due to bursaries and maintenance cost I had to choose Bush University and most of my siblings and relatives are around here so it's easy for them to visit and to help me"

With regard to his choice of field of study, martin chose BA in Criminal Justice. I asked him why:

> *MARTIN: "there is a lot of crime in my area, no justice for the community. I wanted to be an investigator"*

Higher Education Experience

Chaotic transition

Martin experiences a chaotic transition at Bush University:

> *Martin: "during the first day of registration there was a lot of people, it was very difficult to register, some students came with their parents to help them and I was with some of my friends. We had to fight for us to get registered, we fought a lot… I used to gamble in order to raise money for transport so that I can go and join the registration line with other.*

During the registration chaos, Martin and his friends were eventually helped by a member of support staff who assisted them to successfully register online and to access NSFAS and university accommodation immediately.

Financially excluded on his first year of study

Martin higher education experience was short lived, he was financially excluded due to an oversubscribed financial aid system:

> *MARTIN : "I applied for this bursary called NSFAS, and we were accepted…later we received a message {from NSFAS} saying there are shortages of funds... and at that time, I had a room on campus, I was staying at school. I didn't have money to buy some books. You see we needed some laptop to type the assignments, I didn't have those things. We received that message at the end of the first semester, after the exams. A lot of people received this message, we protested but nothing happened. I was living with one of my friends, we had to share what we had , food… he would lend me his laptop so that I can type the assignments.*

At the end of the academic year Martin asked his mother for assistance but she could not assist. All she had was what I used to pay registration fee. It was tough. She struggled.

By the end of the academic year, Martin owed the university a year worth of tuition fee. This prevented him from being able to register the following year and that marked the end of his higher education journey:

> *MARTIN : " I dropped out and came back home and started selling braaied meat, and then I decided to take a few part time jobs with a guy installing ceilings, that ended and them I was subcontracted at the department of agriculture and that also ended and now I am unemployed and it is very difficult to get a job".*

6.8 Conclusion

While each narrative account presents a working-class student's sole journey of non-completion in higher education, there are notable themes that found expression in each life story. First, all dropouts where top academic achievers in secondary school, it is these grades that enabled them to meet the ever-rising and stricter admission requirements in higher education. Secondly, their origin and family background are similar but far from homogeneous. Thirdly, all but one (Tali)

dropped out of university in their first year of study. From a turbulent transition and hard landing on campus, they were not given an opportunity to recover and persist. Fourthly, all dropouts where pushed out of the university despite their willingness to continue studying. They faced a double-edged sword of academic/financial exclusion. Fifthly, the trauma of being a dropout has not derailed their intention to one day further their studies.

Key dimensions of dropouts' higher education experiences:

Turbulent transition and hard landings on arrival in higher education

Participants experienced very turbulent transitions and hard landings upon arrival in higher education. By 'hard landings' I refer to working-class students' disproportionately challenging first few weeks at university and by turbulent transitions I refer to their tumultuous and uncertain first year of study mainly characterised by a prolonged struggle to intergrade into an unfamiliar and hostile university environment. Participants' narrative accounts identified *an unexpected gap between school and university*, *difficulty with the English language*, a culture shock and *NSFAS funding related* challenges as some of the factors that contributed to their *"tough and scary"* landings on arrival at university and "*tormenting"* first days in class that made some of them want to immediately pack their bags and go back home.

Linda, a dropout at Merger University, felt the complete lack of familiarity with the everyday workings of the university and its unwritten rules of the game that characterised his transition was worsened by his non-existent social capital. For him difficulty with English did not only derail his academic programme but further made it difficult to accumulate much needed social capital. *: "There I was struggling to understand, even scared to ask questions because obviously I was nervous that my English is not, I might get laughed and everything… And it was just difficult, because I couldn't ask questions and I was there trying to hold those words that were difficult to me, trying to jot them down so that I can later on get some sort of explanation and definitions on that"* (Linda, Dropout, Merger University). He felt simply lost in the crowd.

The excerpt below from my interview with Linda captures participants' narratives of their helpless first few weeks on campus:

> *To tell you the truth, I had no idea what was expected of me. I mean, I spent the whole first semester without a tutor. Most students were assigned to tutors and I wasn't because I had no idea there are people called tutors … I don't know where they got the tutors. I knew nothing much. I mean, I was as confused as ... To tell you the truth, I think the reason why I didn't know about tutors and everything was because I missed out on most of my classes because I was getting lost on campus trying to find classes and everything…I spent like first two weeks without a timetable because you had to make one for yourself. They say you first have to look into a computer and then, I don't know, you go to student portal and then you go there, you create your own timetable and I didn't know that. I had no idea. So, that's two weeks wasted. I have no idea. I just go there to varsity, look around, geez, I don't know what's going on, until some of the students told me about timetable…* (Linda, Dropout, Merger University).

Wadzi also experienced a particularly hard landing at Merger University from which she never recovered. Central to her challenging start to the academic year and essentially an overarching dimension her overall higher education experience was the poor administration and mismanagement of NSFAS funding at the Merger University.

Hughes and Smail (2015) place emphasis on the significance of the transition period in students' overall higher education journey. They stress the manner in which students' transition period is managed as one of the key determinants of their overall higher education experience including their odds of successful completion of their studies.

Homelessness and the Student Housing Crisis

Participants' narrative shone the limelight on the hindering effect of student housing and resultant homelessness. Linda's narrative accounts best elucidate how the student housing shortages worsen their already turbulent transition and delayed adjustment into the university's social and academic environment. Furthermore, the student housing crisis and accompanying experiences of homelessness do not affect male and female students the same way. At Bush University students' narratives highlight the horror of being female, working class and homeless at South African universities.

At Bush University, working class students who live far from campus have to choose between the cost and inconvenience of having to commute daily or illegally squatting (sub-letting) from those who secured University accommodation. For those who choose to squat, subletting comes with its own disabling conditions. Given its informality, those who squat are always at the mercy of the legitimate tenant and at times have to endure abusive conditions. Students told me about squatting students having to put up with financial extortion and sometimes sexual harassment:

According to Bryon and Peart (2017) student homelessness is a stain in the higher education sector's prestigious image in society, so much so that many would rather look away than confront it . It remains grossly under searched (Mulrenan et al, 2018). It is often accompanied food insecurity, another silent assassin living amongst university students worldwide (Meldrum and Willows, 2006). In their recent study , Mulrenan and colleagues (2018,p144) found that 'the impact of homelessness was far-reaching in terms of their emotional wellbeing and ability to fully participate in university life, including pressure on time and financial resources, inability to fully focus on studies, and limited engagement with fellow students and the wider university experience'.

South Africa has a student housing crisis. According to Statistics South Africa, the sector can only accommodate 20% of the total student population. In his presentation to the Fees Commission in 2017, the Statistician General revealed that South African Universities currently has just under 200 000 beds backlog to reach 80% of enrolled students. This number is said to increase annually. This is echoed the findings of the 2011 Ministerial Report on Student Housing which revealed the extent of the student housing crisis and the shocking and inhumane conditions under which a significant number of students live and study under. While the student housing crisis is nationwide, the picture is worse at historically disadvantaged universities that remain disproportionately under resourced today.

'Dropouts': Pushed not Pulled out of higher education

Non-completion in higher education is defined and understood differently amongst scholars. This is understandable given the different approaches from which scholars have sought to deepen our understanding student completion and non-completion in higher education. The focus is often on students who 'choose' to leave before completion. Importantly, there is often an implied sense of agency on the part of the student in the decision to discontinue one's studies at the university. There is an implied existence of 'choice'. For example, a student decides to discontinue her studies in favour of an employment opportunity that has presented itself while she is in the middle of her studies. In this example, we can see 'employment' as a pull factor and the student 'deciding' to pursue work over her studies. In their 2005 study of the dropout challenge in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Island, Jocey Quinn and her colleagues focussed exclusively on 'working-class students who choose to leave before completion'.

On the other hand, participants' experiences of non-completion in my study shine the spotlight on a less talked about dimension of non-completion i.e. students who get 'pushed' out of the university on academic and financial grounds , and against their desire to continue with their studies.

Given my experience as a former president of the Student Union, I am familiar with this rarely spoken about 'push' form of non-completion whereby a student who fails a number of modules at the end of the academic year is academically excluded, deregistered and 'pushed' out of the university by their faculty despite their willingness to continue studying. In some of the elite institutions such as Ivory Tower University and Stellenbosch University, students are deregistered and forced out of their programmes in the middle of the academic year. In July 2018, to draw attention to the challenge of pushed non-completion, MatieMedia, a Campus Newspaper at Stellenbosch University revealed the following reality:

"Approximately 11.2% of Stellenbosch University (SU) first time first-years drop out after the first year of study," says Loumarie Kistner, data-analyst at SU Information Governance."The trend did not change significantly over the past five years." If the trend holds, 591 of SU first-years won't return after the June exams.

This form of academic of exclusion, in turn, triggers financial exclusion. A student excluded on the basis of poor academic performance loses her financial aid package from NSFAS. In South Africa, double-edged sword so often loosely referred to as "financial exclusion" and "academic exclusion".

All dropouts in this study were either "academically excluded" because they have been "financially excluded" i.e. denied registration because they have been dropped out of NSFAS's financial aid programme and have outstanding debt or "financially excluded" because they have been "academically excluded" i.e. dropped out of NSFAS financial aid programme because of their "poor academic record" at the university. All 'dropouts' in this study were pushed out of their university against their desire to continue with their studies on either of these grounds. All, except Tali at Bush University, were pushed out of the university on their first year of study.

Linda, Wadzi and Martin: Let Down by the National Students Financial Aid Scheme

Linda, Wadzi and Martin all felt let down by the very National Students Financial Aid Scheme which is supposed to support and not hinder their higher education journeys. In recent years, NSFAS' administrative deficiencies have resulted in the scheme approving more students that it had funding available, and Linda became one of the victims of this ineptitude. He cried about how his NSFAS funding application status remained "provisionally funded" throughout the year and yet his tuition debt remained on his student account. Linda's higher education journey crash landed due to NSFAS's administrative deficiencies. Despite his funding constraints, Linda continued attending classes at Merger University under the hope that NSFAS would eventually come through. It did not. At the end of the academic year Linda's academic records were withheld and he was denied registration the following academic year to "outstanding fees". And that is how Linda was pushed out of higher education at the end of his first year of study at Merger University.

Martin's higher education journey came to crashing end when NSFAS informed him that they had approved more students that they had funding for and therefore would no longer be in a position to fund his studies.

Wadzi: "You can't even count on NSFAS. Don't trust it".

Similarly, Wadzi, a dropout at Merger University, experienced a particularly hard landing at Merger University from which she never recovered. Central to her terrible start to the academic year and essentially an overarching dimension her overall higher education experience is the poor administration and mismanagement of NSFAS funding at the university.

Towards the end of her first academic year at Merger University, Wadzi and the rest of NSFAS provisionally funded students were informed that NSFAS at Merger University had run out of funds and that they must try the following year. This effectively pushed Wadzi out of the university. The following year her NSFAS funding was once again approved but she was prevented from registering until she cleared her outstanding tuition fee of the previous academic year. Unable to come up with the money Wadzi was forced to drop out of Merger University. Until this day she has no idea how she performed

academically in both her first and second semester examination as her grades remain withheld due to outstanding fees.

The University's refusal for Wadzi to register for her second academic year left her father particularly devastated. She explained "So my dad was sick and tired of explaining to people. So he was quite disappointed. At some point I think he felt like he's failing." The disappointment was worsened by how, whilst in ques for help at NSFAS offices on campus, Wadzi recalled witnessing fraud, favouritism and general disorganisation. A class mate informed her of a guy who was helping students secure NSFAS funding provided she brought a R1 000 bribe. She failed to raise the bribe amount and the girl who paid the bribe was sorted…*" she went there and then now she's studying, she's doing her third year. She's doing her third year, she got NSFAS".*

Today, given her experience with NSFAS at Merger University, Wadzi is not just disappointed that her educational journey crash-landed, she wants nothing to do with NSFAS.

> *…I'd say with my experience, even if I hear NSFAS, even if they say with NSFAS you don't have to pay the money back, I just don't want anything to do with it. If someone says NSFAS, I think corruption, I think of favours…it's quite very low and you can't count on it. You can't even count on NSFAS. Don't trust it.*
>
> *(Wadzi, Dropout, Merger University)*

In the case of Naledi, Importantly, she did not "withdraw" or "pull out" of her studies or the university, and neither did the University push her out . NSFAS, as her sole source of funding, withheld the funding which prevented her from being able to register and continue with her studies.

Despite having not voluntarily dropped out of the university, when reflecting on the tragic end to their studies, Tali looked inward for what she perceived to be hinderances behind her experience of non-completion in higher education. Towards the end of our interview Naledi identified a delayed change in her "attitude" towards university as a major hinderance.

My attitude from first semester to second semester, it was totally different. That second semester it was like so progressive, showing that if I had started good, I would end up good. But it was too late to what, to cover up…So, second semester I was serious, and I passed all the modules.

(Naledi, Dropout, Merger University)

Naledi's experience was shared by Tali, a dropout from Bush university whose was also "financially excluded" for failing to pass more than 50% of her modules in her second year of study.

Tali: Failed Not Finished

Tali is the only one of the five dropouts who went beyond her first year of study. She dropped out in her 2nd year of study.

During her 2nd year of study Tali's higher education experience took a sudden turn for the worst when she experienced what appears to be mental health related issues. She recalls experiencing an imponderable sudden loss of interest in her studies, the results of which culminated in her missing most of her classes. She was traumatised and suicidal. She narrates the trauma of being laughed at by her class mates for failing to qualify for her exams:

Having failed more than 50% of her modules in her second year of study, Tali's NSFAS funding was discontinued and she was prevented from registering for her third year of study at Bush University.

To end our interview, Tali explained her future plan to one day return to complete her degree and one day be called 'Dr". She acknowledges her failure but insist that this is not the end of her educational journey. She insists on one day earning a degree in order to make her "hero" mother proud.

The NSFAS funding's administrative deficiencies and inconsistencies experienced by dropouts in this study and many others in their narrative became one of the primary contributors to the annual student protest across the higher education sector. These became known as #FeesMustFall protests. In response to the demands of the students, on December 16th 2017, the South African government reformed the whole higher education funding model.

The following matrix shows how the key themes identified in chapter 5 and 6 are represented across the rest of student participants:

Table 3: Summary of Themes Across Student Participants

Origins and Family Backgrounds

Humble beginnings: Rural and Township origins	**Narratives of disrupted and challenging formative years : Nadir moments**	**narratives illuminate the enabling side of working-class origins: community cultural wealth**
❖ I am from a rural village in Limpopo province. My father dropped out in grade 5 and my mother only completed Matric… both of them are unemployed. I am the first to go to university in my family. **(Muofhe, Merger University)**	❖ My father left when I was 6 years old… **(Shirely, Merger University)**	❖ My mother worked as a domestic worker… and her employer helped me enroll at Merger University. He knew people at the university. **(Kelly, Merger University)**
❖ I am from a village in Venda , I have four siblings, none went to university . I live with my mom, my father passed away when I was 5 years old. We survive on social grants from government. **(Denzhe , Bush University)**	❖ When things were hectic at my granny's place, my brother and I ran away… So, we lived on the streets from January to June… we moved from Qwa Qwa to Jo'burg and then we stayed in here for two months and we moved from here to Cape Town. I knew Cape Town through being a street kid not through being somebody and when we were in Cape Town we stayed two months we moved to Durban and when we're in Durban it was in June and it was cold and I told my brother, dude like I can't do this anymore… **(Mutambi, Ivory Tower University)**	❖ In grade 11 I joined a study group with two bright guys from my village, one of them worked at community radio station… since then my life now was all about studying, coming back from school, go home, and then do all the house chores , soccer and then back to studying… This helped me a lot. **(Mutambi, Ivory Tower University)**
❖ I am from rural Taung village. My mother has been a domestic worker all her life…she is a pensioner now. **(Shriley , Merger University)**		

- My father has 30 kids , of the 30 , I am the only one who went to university.
  (Imelani, Bush Univerity)

- When my mom passed my granny took me to my dad's side… they refused. So, my grandmother was like let's forget about this, from now on me and your grandad we are going to be your parents. I mean I grew up knowing that my grannies are my parents because there was no one who was a father figure apart from my granddad or a mother figure apart from my mum or my grandmother.
  (Mutambi, Ivory Tower University)

- I was born in a village in Limpopo until grade 10 and then I moved to a township in Benoni Johannesburg. My father worked as mechanic and my mother is unemployed.
  (Murangi , Ivory Tower University)

- I was born in a township and ja in a township.. you know how townships are, we're just ordinary citizens… not having the best life but actually, you know, surviving.
  (Andani, Ivory Tower University)

- My Mom was an administrator…My dad only completed primary school, he passed away when I was still in school… he worked as a technician but when he passed away things really changed…
  (Andani, Ivory Tower University)

- So, I come from a family that was rich and unfortunately life happens and so everything collapsed on my birth. When I was born, everything was collapsing… the things were not there anymore, only structures were left…My Mother is unemployed and my father is a pensioner.
  (Imelani, Bush University)

- My Mom was an administrator…My dad only completed primary school, he passed away when I was still in school… he worked as a technician but when he passed away things really changed…
  (Andani, Ivory Tower University)

- …from Grade 5 to Grade 12 I started to stay with my mom, my mom got divorced when I was the age of seven.
  (Zwhivhuya, Bush University)

- So, I knew about Ivory Tower University from an early age in … my grandfather … was working here and my aunt would come here and visit. He still works here…
  (Murangi, Ivory Tower University)

Pathways n Route Higher Education

Teachers help navigate under-resourced schooling experiences	Road to Higher Education Paved with Stepping Stones And Agents of Transformation	The illusion of 'choice' in the higher education choice process
❖ We had very motivated teachers. Probably 90% of us had an idea that we will end up in institutions of higher learning . From as early as grade 8 we were always told we will go to institutions of higher learning . My school had produced people who have gone to the top 5 performers in the country. **(Muofhe, Merger University)** ❖ My mathematics and physical science teacher was my mentor, he is the one who got the university application for me and he even sent them for me , yes he encouraged me in everything. **(Tshifhiwa, Bush University)** ❖ Our teachers were very encouraging, they would organise career guidance to motivate us….in Secondary School there was this one teacher who used to advise me about universities .. She told me to apply in time so that I can easily get admission. She even printed the application forms and prospectuses for me. **(Konani, Bush University)** ❖ I struggled a lot with trigonometry and my Mathematics teacher, he would sacrifice time with his family to help me out with trigonometry. He understood my situation at home because he kept on saying "you can't let the situation at home stop you from doing certain things. No, you're not your circumstances or you're not your mother's decisions at the end of the day". Yes, it was also more of the emotional support… **(Kelly, Merger University)**	❖ When my father's family refused to help me with my education, my physical science teacher was like … "okay, I have kids and then I have to pay their school fees and everything but I'm going to sacrifice; I'm going to give you this three thousand three hundred , I'm going to buy you clothes I'm going to buy you food and then you can take all that to University and then please make sure that you make your grannies proud because they fought so hard for you and I've seen by my eyes that your father's family doesn't even care about you". Then she gave me three thousand three hundred and then I paid registration fee, it was on a Wednesday and on Thursday morning I took a taxi coming to Ivory Tower University … **(Mutambi, Ivory Tower University)** ❖ I always wanted to be a scientist so I chose to do science at secondary level till grade twelve. So I had this other teacher at school, she was always encouraging me to pass. She will always give me money just to challenge me to make sure that I pass and she will tell me if I don't pass, I have to give that money back to her. So that's how I was encouraged to pass grade twelve. **(Mulamuli, Bush University)** ❖ My journeyer to university was made possible by three factosr: First I dropped out of cokkege because I preffered university, second, a friend who introduced to the National Students Financial Aid Shceme after	❖ I went for mining engineering because A lot of my uncles are in mining, mine workers. I chose Ivory Tower University because my other options didn't have funding offers , so it was easier for me. **(Sibusiso, Ivory Tower University)** ❖ The idea of being an Economist or doing Economics, my teacher brought it up when I was in grade nine … she could see that when we do a presentation, which are Economics related, I enjoyed them. So, then she advised me that there's this what you call an Economist, so you can be that or you can do a course that can lead you there…I chose merger university because I wanted to be away from Limpopo province….I didn't like Bush university… everyone who was coming from Johannesburg was talking about the life of the city…you cant be born in Limpopo, marry in Limpopo and die in Limpopo…. **(Muofhe, Merger University)** ❖ my father is a mechanic who didn't go to university…So, I'm like, if I come back and I have a degree, our business will grow because they will say his child also, is a mechanic who went to Ivory Tower University and he will know how to run. So, I think I will be like my father, but who's more of a professional… and also we had a relative who did electrical

	I dropped out of college, and thirdly, I reached out to an uncle who knew about Bush university and helped me… So those are the three reasons that contributed in to me finding myself in NSFAS and also the university. **(Imelani, Bush University)** ❖ I don't remember having a proper conversation with my dad. Like my dad was more of a visitor. We know that he used to stay in town. So, he would come mostly on Friday and so Monday, go back… I used to think my grandma is my dad because whenever my mom couldn't help, the next person to go to is grandma. So, those were the most two people that lifted me up to where I am today as a graduate. **(Muofhe, Merger University)**	engineering at ivory tower university. **(Murangi, Ivory Tower University)** ❖ I came to Bush University because I was rejected by the University of Limpopo which was my first choice… **(Denzhe, Bush University)** ❖ I took BSc Environmental Sciences because it was the only degree that had space because I made a late application … Merger University rejected my first choice and recommended a programme I didn't like , so I came to Bush University. **(Mutshidzi, Bush University)**

Key dimensions of participants' higher education experiences

Reproductive dimensions of participants' HE experiences	**Transformative dimensions of participants' HE experiences**
1. Experiences of turbulent transitions and hard landings on arrival in higher education; ❖ The beginning was hard because where we come from, they teach you mathematics and biology in Isizulu. Depending who's the teacher, they use their home language to try to make things better for you to understand. But here now everything is English, so you struggle. Sometimes when they teach, the accent is a problem. The lecturer is teaching you, you hear them but you don't hear what they are saying. So, you are just there for,	1. **they do not arrive empty handed, they bring durable community cultural wealth to higher education** ❖ … I brought my church with me to the university…when I went to university there was a group of student fellowship, the church that I go to, the Zion Christian Church. So, those people made me feel welcomed, they made me feel wanted. **(Muofhe, Merger University)** ❖ I had motivation from my grandparents , I had to try to push until I graduate so that I can make them proud…. And then eventually when I graduated it was

ceremonially to say you attend lectures, but you don't hear because of their accent. Some lecturers are international.
(Murangi, Ivory Tower University)

- I was note free , I was in shock, and as with every first year student, I struggled with trying to find attending venues, how to understand the system of the university. Sometimes you are late for a class because you don't know the venue… And then the most challenge that I experienced in the university during the first time was I was helped by someone to register and that person made me to register wrong modules, I could not it reverse anymore… because I was older, I also struggled making friends in the beginning.
(Imelani, Bush University)

- so you know when it's your first time in Johannesburg… in high school everything that they were teaching us which is in English they were translating to us in Sotho… but it was crippling us because when I got to Ivory Tower University I was agreeing with everything, I didn't even hear what they said…
(Mutambi, Ivory Tower University)

- NSFAS only paid for my tuition, meals and books but not accommodation. During my first year I had to squat with other students who had accommodation on campus until I found my own accommodation.
(Mutshidzi, Bush University)

2. homelessness and housing challenges

- I was squatting at one of the university student accommodation. I only got accommodation during my final year

the best moment ever because everyone at home was very relieved.

(Mutambi, Ivory Tower University)

2. **their possession and development of a transformative habitus (Mills, 2008) and wealth of aspirational capital (Yosso,2005) propels them over the finish line**

- Aspirational Capital- I can say the person who influenced I think is my uncle because he's a doctor and… I want to prove him wrong that like I can basically survive at Ivory Tower University because his words were that "you won't survive at Ivory Tower University go to the University of Free State" … And for him it was a negative thing to say but for me it became a motivation and I was like okay I'm going to push harder until I get what I want, ja.
(Mutambi, Ivory Tower University)

- you know, they always say Ivory Tower University is challenging, but I was like, but people still graduate here. So, I looked for people with positive attitude and asked them what can be done. How does one succeed here? I want to succeed. People in rural areas want me to work and feed them, so what must I do? They're like "there is this thing of consulting…when your lecturers say consult, you must take it seriously and you must use all the resources, like use your tutors and so on and so forth". So, I created a network of people to seek help from when I faced difficulty and then those things worked for me. So, I talked to a lot of people because , I think naturally I talk to people. So, it enabled me to fit in and adjust.
(Murangi, Ivory Tower University)

- … a story that influenced me is the story that Robert Kiyosaki wrote the book about it, The Poor Dad and Rich Dad… this story in this book it inspired me and

(Mulamuli, Bush University)

- Accommodation was nightmare. I stayed in so many places
  (Kelly, Merger University)

- I could t not find accommodation so the first year was very difficult for me , I used to travel every day from home, which was not easy for me to study when I arrived at home because I used to feel tired when I arrived back home because of the transport I think. And using the university library to study meant I commute home very late at night
  (Denzhe, Bush University

- During my first year of study I lived in one of the University accommodation, but six months later I had to leave because my NSFAS could not cover the full cost of my accommodation.
  (Andani , Ivory Tower University)

- On my first year I couldn't find accommodation at Bush University because it was full so I had to squat with friends until I found a place off campus.
  (Mulamuli, Bush University)

3. distrust and toxic student-faculty relations

… when I started attending the class there was this lecturer , on the the first day we came to class , introducing himself by saying "half of you wont pass this module you will never pass it. You'll rather change the degree or change the module…"
(Tshifhiwa , Bush University)

With lecturers **…** I didn't reach out. how some academics present themselves, they are not approachable . So, due to those type of challenges I didn't consult at the very beginning because of it wasn't easy, it wasn't easy to do that.

(**Murangi, Ivory Tower University)**

then I even opened the saving account ja for saving my money I think that's the best story I have ever heard.
(Mutshidzi, Bush University)

- My turning point came when I asked myself, why are other people getting ahead of me, what makes me different? am I a failure and are better than me you know? And above everything my greatest high/high was understanding that you know the greatest motivator in one's life is yourself. that's where you know I tried to turn around my life I just started to discover myself, I started you know from being the back-bencher kid, from the sick child that just didn't appeal you know… I just started taking risks, I started exploring, I started believing in myself … at Ivory Tower University , I began understanding that if people do things one way that doesn't mean it's the only way; you are a unique individual as a student…
  (Andani, Ivory Tower University)

- I remember there were even times where whenever a piece job presented itself, I would take it, I will take it, so that I can save my mom just knows that there is this thing called university, she doesn't know how much money for the registration, she doesn't even know how much monies for the food…I'm here to get a degree, so I will basically say, I decided not to look at the lows.
  (Muofhe, Merger University)

3. **agents of transformation (Mills, 2008) facilitate the accumulation of idealised forms of capital which in turn multiplies their chances of success**

- I would say my best friend took me through the university, he actually showed me what should be done by a student at the university for instance, these group discussions, this all night studying sessions. All these things I would do that with him. Those are the things that made me to pass.
  (Imelani, Bush University)

4. a poorly administered and mismanaged financial aid programme.

- NSFAS was not enough for me and I was not using it for my personal things, I was using it to buy things for my mom at home so that all of my sisters and brothers can be able to survive yes. It was because at home we were depending on child grant.
  (Denzhe, Bush University)

- During my first year of study I lived in one of the University accommodation, but six months later I had to leave because my NSFAS could not cover the full cost of my accommodation.
  (**Andani, Ivory Tower University)**

- My first year was saved by a friend Lusane I used to squat in his flat before my NSFAS funding came through. Without him, things would have been very difference… we need more information about NSFAS at schools. A lot of us at school knew nothing about NSFAS and how to apply for it. There is lack of awareness about it. I never knew about NSFAS until I got to Ivory Tower University.

  (Mutambi, Ivory Tower University)

- My NSFAS was supplemented by a food stiped from the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP). They are the ones who helped me apply for NSFAS as well
  (Denzhe, Merger University)

- At Ivory Tower University I got a friend who taught me how to speak English properly , he was from Portugal … so now I have a friend who speak English properly and then he makes sure that my English is proper, and we study together and me passing well, getting golden key, it was positive. Like that impacted very positively because at the end of the year I managed to pass on and get a golden key which was my high peak.
  (Muofhe, Ivory Tower University)

- My academic experience benefited a lot by a non-profit organization that helps rural youth to access and succeed at universities. I was introduced to them by a friend. This environment exposed me to a lot of young people like me who were confident, who were used to the environment at Ivory Tower University and a network of helping hands… this increased my odds of success big time.
  (Mutambi, Ivory Tower University)

4. **beyond 1st Year, their journey to completion is a relatively "smooth" one**

- So as the years proceed I was adjusting and also adopting the university life and trying to find freedom and peace in the university, after second year I was familiar with the university and went on to complete my degree and applied for postgraduate studies.
  (Imelani, Bush University).

- … during my second year is where I started enjoying my varsity life…but during my first year it was tough From . my second semester and I did it well, I was using NSFAS… it was paying my accommodation my fees my food and the book allowance … I no longer stayed at home
  (Tshifhiwa , Bush University)

- By my third year of study I was so confident I was even approached by the ZCC church youth

	fellowship to mentor first year students . I also took up leadership roles as chairperson of this youth fellowship at Merger University **(Muofhe, Merger University)**

Chapter 7: Reproductive and Transformative Characteristics of Working-Class Students In Higher Education: *An Institutional Perspective*

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, narrative accounts of university managers, policy makers, student leaders, academic and support staff at three different universities are examined for themes, with a particular focus on their lived experiences and perceptions of enabling and disabling characteristics of working-class students in South African higher education. At this stage the focus of analysis has moved away from the voice of working-class students to narrative accounts of key stakeholders in the university community and their perceptions of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in South African higher education. The chapter is based on a thematic analysis the interviews I conducted with Heads of School, Registrars, Senior Lecturers, Student Leaders, Policy Makers, NSFAS Administrators/Managers and a Vice Chancellor at three historically and presently different learning contexts in South Africa: Bush University, Merger University and Ivory Tower University. The differences between these three universities were briefly explained in Chapter 6.

The experiences of such key members of the university community and their perceptions of categories of the student population are an important for a number of reasons: they spend most of the academic year with the students, their perceptions influence and inform teaching and learning practices, including what is recognised , valued and rewarded as valid knowledge, and yet their experiences and outlooks are not homogenous. This is particularly important when examining experiences of a 'non-traditional' group of students whose increased access to higher education can be in conflict with universities' institutional and embodied histories, values, ideals and practices (Reay et al, 2009; Funston, 2012). Alarmingly, despite their known importance to students' experiences of completion in higher education, faculty members are reported (EBA, 2017) to be significantly underutilised in this role, with efforts to improve student success largely informally situated in isolated pockets of the university student support structures. Student leaders on the other hand offer a critical and less restricted voice about the experiences of the constituencies they represent.

Significant to this chapter is a thematic analysis and representation of key stakeholders' perceptions of what working class students lack and/or possess when they arrive at different South African Universities, and how this relate to prevailing patterns completion and non-completion amongst

them. Such findings, Mills (2008) suggest, are critical to understanding the reproductive or transformative trajectory of the field of university education. What about working-class students diminishes and/or improves their odds of completion at different South African HEIs? Is there a mismatch between what working class students bring (their portfolio of capitals and dispositions) and universities' expectations?

In my coding of the data, I specifically looked at how participants construct working class students in relation to their experiences of completion and non-completion across the three universities. I coded the data into two overarching themes: how they spoke about working class students in *positive ways* and how they also spoke about working class students in *negative ways.* Two overarching themes emerged out of the coding process: **reproductive characteristics of working-class students that hinder their odds of completion,** and **transformative characteristic of working-class students that propel the unlikely graduates over the finish line**. In Conclusion, this chapter provides a table of summary of what participants felt were disabling and enabling characteristics of working-class students at different South African Universities.

7.2 Disabling Characteristics of Working-Class Students in Higher Education

What about working-class students diminishes their odds of completion at different South African HEIs? An analysis participants' experiences and perceptions of what working class students lack in higher education generated six key themes and subthemes:

*7.2.*1 Their NSFAS' Financial aid *moderates*, it does not *eliminate* the hindering effect of being a working-class in higher education

An important theme to arise is that NSFAS' Financial aid *moderates*, it does not *eliminate* the hindering and seemingly indelible stain of being a working-class student in South African higher education. Participants widely acknowledged that the burden of being of working-class origin is, in many ways, following this group of students from their villages and township into the university halls and hallways. When reflecting on working class students' origins and family background, several participating university managers, administrators and policymakers particularly felt that the poor administration and overall inadequacy of NSFAS has weakened instead of strengthening working-class students' ability to negotiate and persist in higher education. Instead of mediating, participants felt NSFAS had worsened working class students' higher education experiences in a manner that diminishes their odds of successful completion.

In the excerpts below, participants paint a picture of a typical NSFAS funded working-class students and the its disabling effect of their higher education experience.

Joshua, a Policy Maker and Manager of the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), an NGO that provides additional and continuous support to NSFAS funded students, narrates a typical profile of an NSFAS funded student:

> *"… they were perhaps the least likely of all young people in South Africa to access higher education and that was partly about financial barriers to access, but it was also things about lack of information, lack of connectivity, growing up in families and communities where there was little aspiration for higher education. So, there was a view that there was a need to sensitise and encourage such young people, help them to navigate their way through the system and to you know, to access finances to get in. A very small proportion of our students who come from home when mom and dad both are living at home, you know. Most times they're growing up with a mother headed household or a grandmother headed household, or an aunt headed household. Very few just left home with mother and father there. Most are coming from very difficult or, not difficult necessarily but, you know, disrupted family circumstances. They take a long time to read and digest and I think a lot of that is because many young black students do not come from a reading culture. You know? In their home there are no books or very few books. Their parents don't read, they don't read".*
>
> *(Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Education Access Programme)*

Martin, Financial Aid Manager, narrated how working-class students' humble beginnings follow then into higher education, despite being on NSFAS:

> *"… they're never based in the social structures that enable success. And part of that social structure is a lot of the kids that don't do well, are* ***coming from families who are, who don't know what University is,*** *that don't even know, all they want is the end result, if you passed or failed. There is no context around what it takes and all of that".*
>
> (Martin, Manager and Policy Maker, NSFAS)

Prof Ngoye, Head of School at Merger University, felt NSFAS financial aid package is not comprehensive enough:

He added that NSFAS financial aid is not comprehensive enough and as a result NSFAS moderates but not eliminate the working-class burden on its beneficiaries:

> *And also, if you look at the package as well, of what they approve…If you travel from a rural province like your Limpopo, your Eastern Cape, your KZN, your Free State, you arrive in Johannesburg, you need accommodation, you also need food for you to survive. You need stationary, you need books, you need all sorts of things. You also need an iPad because our Universities require that by the time you arrive here you will be able to type assignments and those types of things. It will be important if NSFAS, if they don't provide you with all of the things that I have mentioned, to also give supports to the student they are funding. NSFAS need to go beyond just providing funds. NSFAS need to look at the broader context. For various learners come from various background. They don't just need funding, but they also need advice and guidance. And that is what NSFAS is not seeing. A roadshow in my view can be very useful. All NSFAS students are given funding and also being given some kind of orientation into the University life".*
>
> (Prof Ngoye, Head of School, Merger University)

7.2.2 En Route Higher Education: unequally classed and raced HE aspirations and choices

HE aspirations channelled by social class circumstances

Participants' narrative accounts suggest that working-class students' education aspirations and 'choices remain fundamentally classed, racialised and gendered. First, their aspirations and choices are considered classed in that they mirror and are underwritten by conditions of students' social class status. Working-class students' higher education aspirations and choices are said to be informed less about their knowledge higher education options available to them and a lot more by their social class circumstances. In the main, these social class circumstances channel them towards choices that the middle class are less interested in. Many felt the existence of "*choice"* is more of an illusion than reality for this group of students. Moreover, the lack of role models is said to leave

working class students making higher education choices *"out of ignorance"* (Joshua, Policymaker). Such experience of choice and aspirations is said to misguide their higher education expectations and in turn hinder more than enhance their higher education experience and outcomes.

The notion of working-class students being channelled to higher education by their social circumstances was particularly ventilated by Professor Benson, a senior lecturer and former head of the school Bush University.

> *"So, it seems to me some of them do not know why they are coming to university. They see it as perhaps as a social trend … Then I think one other thing which I noticed which I still see quite a bit is that… and I think it's coming from, from the idea that some students don't know why they're here… there is a pressure to get some university education to get a job, to get the job and that pressure is so strong that perhaps they have not thought of other alternatives of still having some training… So ja so I think some people were not supposed to come to university, but the circumstances channelled them to the university you know…"*
>
> (Prof Benson, Academic Staff, Bush University)

Historic hierarchy and inequality between universities reproduced through students' higher education "choices"

The enduring perception of historically black institutions as inferior to historically white institutions is , in the main, deemed responsible for working class students' preference for historically white institutions, thereby sustaining the historic stratification and hierarchy between universities. In the excerpt below, Professor Basson at Bush University, one of the country's historically black only universities, narrated how his university remains a reserve of those rejected by high status elite institutions:

> *…there is something which I've picked when I was the Head of Department. When dealing with admission of students and I notice that for a good amount of our applicants Bush University was not their first choice. So they've gone elsewhere and have been rejected and they come to Bush University…*
>
> (Prof Benson, Academic Staff, Bush University)

Participants' narratives suggest that South Africa's colonial and apartheid legacy of racial and class hierarchy between universities lives on through working class students' choice of institutions.

Historically, apartheid South Africa divided universities by race, class and language group. The well-resourced elite universities reserved for white middle- and upper-class English and Afrikaans speaking South Africans occupied the dominant status, while subordinate, the low status, grossly under resourced and largely rural-based universities reserved for poor and working class black South Africans (Naidoo, 2004).

Choice of Field of Study: "that they're picking courses in ignorance"

With regard to students' choice of field of study, the general perception amongst participants is that "they are picking courses out of ignorance" because they "lack role models… and examples" , and that the lack of academic capital at home and lack of career guidance and awareness in working class schools underprepares them such that they are unable to make informed higher education choices.

> *"…one would be role models. So, you know kids now want to be a doctor and they have no clue that to be a doctor you need science, extra maths etc., because they didn't get told that at school …*
>
> *(Professor Shulman, Academic Staff, Merger University)*
>
> "… think career guidance can be a serious lack for many NSFAS students, that they're picking courses in ignorance, not really knowing what it's about or you know, because 'my mom told me to do it or something, not necessarily because I wanted to do it or really understood or it fit in with my abilities or interest', you know"
>
> *(Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Education Access Programme)*

7.2.3 A mismatch of expectations between working-class students and the university

I. "I felt there was a gap in terms of knowledge base"

Academic staff expressed concern over what they deem to be too wide a gap between working class students' schooling experiences and what universities expect from this group of students, and

that this gap was largely responsible for the turbulent transitions and hard landings that working-class students experience upon arrival in higher education.

As a member of the academic staff at Bush University, Professor Benson felt:

> *"there was a gap in terms of a knowledge base… I am in the biological sciences and I had expected the students to have a certain level of aptitude coming to university, I didn't see that. And one of the difficulties which was the writing skills and then secondly was actually the subject matter itself ja so for me these were the big challenges which as a lecturer I was looking for ways to fix , you know, of ways to fix , we have to move on".*
>
> (Prof Benson, Academic Staff, Bush University)

Professor Benson's sentiment was echoed by Professor Ngoye who decried the disabling effect of the **mismatch between working class schooling experiences and universities' expectations, and an inadequate NSFAS financial aid packages**.

> *"Yes. So, given that {family} background…the main challenge is the transition from basic education into higher education … a number of them arrive at the University not ready despite the fact that they got very good results. Good results they get which qualify them to do Bachelor's degrees, good results that are not necessarily translated into coping with the university… So, we are dealing with students who are not ready to get on with the demands of University. Generally, if you look at our time table, that is another issue. In their high schooling, they would be doing accounting from Monday to Friday. They are seeing their teacher on Monday to Friday and they will be seeing you, they will be seeing a University lecturer for 90 minutes session maybe once a week, right and then they will be attending one tutorial of 90 minutes a week. So, even the contact time between a high school and a University is different".*
>
> (Prof Ngoye, Head of School, Merger University)

II. "Their parents don't read, they don't read"

In addition to working class schools underpreparing students for higher education, Joshua traced the mismatch to the lack of "reading culture" in black working class families as the reason behind the lack of "comprehensive reading skills" and failure to adjust on time.

"*They take a long time to read and digest and I think a lot of that is because many young black students do not come from a reading culture. You know? In their home there are no books or very few books. Their parents don't read, they don't read".*

(Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Education Access Programme)

III. Mono-cultural origins Vs Multicultural higher education destinations

According to Joshua the mismatch is more pronounced at elite institutions where working-class students' mono-cultural origins clash with the multicultural environment at elite universities:

"facing big life transitions coming from rural areas which, you know, can be very mono-cultural, everyone looks like them, speaks the same language, you know, has similar attitudes. They go to a University like Ivory Tower or the University of Cape Town or something, where it's very multi-cultural, different people, lots of different attitudes… they're homesick, they feel like they don't fit. Often a rural student, you know, from a poor background, feels very inadequate, their clothes aren't hip and trendy, their phones aren't great, you know, they just feel they're not quite good enough and their English isn't good enough. So, they're adapting to that.

(Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Education Access Programme)

IV. First generation rural teenagers in cities they know no one

Professor Milner, academic staff at Ivory tower University, sought to add the role played by students' age and their first generation status as contributors to working class students' turbulent transition in higher education . This is worsened, she argues, by their complete lack of support structure upon arrival in a city they are not familiar:

there is no question in my mind that what I'm talking about is directly related to the fact that they come from low-income backgrounds. I think associated with that is that as a result of the financial difficulties they come in is also overlaid with the fact that obviously most, they are first generation University students and they have no support structure in my experience. So, they have no family in, many of them, that I've

come across, don't have family in Johannesburg. So, they're 18/19 years old, the first years, and that's not really, they're still teenagers. I have to say they're still teenagers...They have left home, come to an environment where they're very under resourced…"

(Professor Cooper, Academic Staff, Ivory Tower University)

7.2.4 *Disempowering effect of a working-class habitus at Ivory Towers*

Participants identified the class between students' working class habitus and Ivory Tower University's institutional habitus as a key disabling factor. Working-class students are said to feel shy, unwelcomed, "completely overwhelmed" and "out of place" in higher education, particularly at country's highly selective and elite institutions such as Ivory Tower University.

I. "lower income students did not fight back… they do not question authority… and are less likely to seek help"

Dr Kigali, Senior Lecturer at the highly selective Ivory Tower University, observed how , unlike their middle class counterparts, the experience of lower income students in her lectures continued to be hindered by their working-class habitus which manifests in their treatment of knowledge and tutors as incontestable authority:

… throughout my experiences as a tutor, we used to have this process where we give feedback in the tutorials with the essays. So, they get their essays back in the tutorials and they engage the tutor with feedback. A lot of the lower income students did not fight back. And I don't mean fight back in the sense of I'm not happy with my marks but fight back in a sense of "I think I am right in my argument here". They always accept it when you said it's wrong and they embrace that and for me that comes from this thing that says, "you do not question authority". Whether it's authority in the form of the tutor or the lecturer or authority in the form of the book. So, they take the knowledge itself as knowledge in and of itself. And especially coming into an institution like Ivory Tower University which comes with its own historical memory. There are certain things that you just don't do. There are certain things you don't question about that space and about the people who occupy that space. And then you think about it with a lot of the students coming from Model C (middle class) schools who were very confident to challenge you in the class and sometimes the things that they were challenging you on was just nonsense, but there was the confidence to do it.

(Dr Kigali, Senior lecturer, Ivory Tower University)

Dr Kigali further observed the way middle class students *"from particular social histories come in with the confidence that covers their mediocrity and that allows them to navigate the system through that mediocrity but with a confidence that allows them to succeed"*. This view was reinforced by Professor Shulman, a senior academic at Merger University, who observed that due to their class habitus, working class students' learning experience is partly worsened because they are less likely to seek the help they require:

> *"then I think there is the issue of identity because if you feel out, you're less likely to seek the help you require. I mean, how many working-class students really go to their lecturers? As opposed to middle class and entitled …"*
>
> **(**Professor Shulman, academic staff, Merger university)

II. Rural habitus vs elite institutional culture? they feel "inadequate", "anonymous" and "completely overwhelmed"

In the excerpt below, Joshua identifies a further clash between rural working class students' fall from being top achieves in their rural schools to feeling inadequate, anonymous and completely overwhelmed at elitist Ivory Tower Institutions:

> *Often a rural student, you know, from a poor background, feels very inadequate, their clothes aren't hip and trendy, their phones aren't great, you know, they just feel they're not quite good enough and their English isn't good enough. So, they're adapting to that… there's often a shyness, they're not always confident to communicate. I often find that more so in the engineering students. You know, particularly the guys. I think … they feel very anonymous, you know. If I managed to get to University from my rural school… You know, I was probably best in my class, second in my class, I get to University and I'm nobody. There are thousands and nobody knows me or even cares if I show up…they just don't have that discipline or belief in themselves.*
>
> *(Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Education Access Programme)*

III. **Rural schooling and family background worlds-apart from Ivory Tower University**

Ms Parker, a Senior Manager at Ivory Tower University, felt working class students struggled to a point of dropping out of her campus ,in the main, due to their rural family and schooling background being worlds-apart from the logic and institutional culture at her elite Ivory Tower University, which she argues leaves working class students "completely overwhelmed".

> *… I think for me and it's not NSFAS's fault okay it is just about the jump or the leap from school to University. Okay so we've recognised that many of our students are rural students okay so that in itself is the adjustment to university… It's exposure to a lifestyle that many of our students haven't had. … you know they walk to school… It's a very, very, different world… If they have to come here to Ivory Tower University… And some of them come and they come as first year students getting NSFAS and I think they are just completely overwhelmed and that adaptation, I think, is one of the reasons why we have that high dropout rate.*
>
> (Ms Parker, Senior Manager, Ivory Tower)

7.2.5 The "pulling" effect of having to work whilst studying

The need to work, earn income and send money home whilst studying was identified by participants as significant factor pulling working-class students out of higher education without before completing their studies. Participants observed that some of their students took up part-time work to supplement their inadequate NSFAS financial aid allowance and to send some money home. Professor Cooper, Senior Lecturer at Ivory University, recalled how students in her class who "try and do both" always suffer academically and in most cases drop out and never come back. Sha said *"a lot of them have come to speak to me, they're hoping to get jobs and they will come back …but they don't. That's the one thing I can say, they often don't… they say they'll come back, they don't".*

Professor Cooper's account was both echoed and contrasted by Dr Kigali's roller-coaster experience of *"uplifting"* and "*crushing moments*" working with working class students at Ivory Tower University's School of Psychology who have had to deal with the burden of working whilst studying. In her case, students pulled out of university by the need to work and earn income all

came back to complete their studies. In the excerpt below , Professor Kigali details how the need to work and send money home pulled some of her best students out of university:

> *I've got lots {of memorable experiences} and they're memorable in different ways. They're memorable in ways that it's ... So, there are those good stories where you realise that in spite of the institution, sometimes even in spite of the circumstances and in spite of the struggles, there is a resilience that is there, and you get access to those moments. And then there are also, moments where the system defeats everything, so those very crushing moments.*
>
> *(Dr Kigali, Senior Lecturer, Ivory Tower University)*

Professor Shulman, however, cautioned that working while studying does hinder their chances to successfully complete their studies, it may offer some students an alternative route to social and occupational mobility and help avoid **"***keeping people at University where they really shouldn't be because they've got nothing else to do".*

7.2.6 "*There is a gender element to it":* The horror of being female, working class and homeless in higher education

Lugisani, a student leader at Bush University, emphasized that girls bear the worst brunt of being a working-class in South African higher education. From experiences of sexual harassment and exploitation, to forced prostitution; from sleeping in libraries to the burden of disease, participants told of the horror faced by female working class students across the three institutions. At the centre of the horrors experienced by female working-class students appears to be the South African student housing crisis that continue to expose students to great danger as they scramble for a place to sleep. In the excerpt below Lugisani, details the horrors faced by desperate female working class students at Bush University during the registration period:

> *MUKOVHE: Somebody was telling me about a study exploring the issue of old men taking advantage of young girls here, particularly during registration period.*

LUGISANI: During registration firstly, the University doesn't give those students that are coming from far, accommodation. What we do as student leaders, we force to go and open the same prefabs, but they don't give us keys so that they can lock afterwards. It means when you are sleeping there it's not locked, their phones get stolen, money…some will be told let's go out to the gate…they go out, it means you'll be given to older guys, including those with big cars who are coming to market young girls, that is one of the problems.

So, what happens, they take advantage that she doesn't have money, she comes from a poor background, no food no nothing. It means she must become what, a sex object…if at night you just go to Khoroni gate (local motel) The majority of those girls are students from Bush University. It's our students, I once woke up around four and somebody told me that you must go and sit by the gate and see what is happening, I felt pain because I saw girls that I knew coming back from outside, from selling their bodies because they don't have any funding. That is the problem, that is why if you go to our clinic and check the HIV statistics, Bush University is rating number three of all the universities.

(Lugisani, Student Leader, Bush University)

At Ivory Tower University, Professor Cooper, Senior Lecturer, corroborate the strong link between the student housing crisis and the horror faced by female working class students in her campus:

I think the first time I was really aware of it was when a girl came to me who had been raped in the environment in which she was living and feeling very helpless. We are a psychology department and I referred her to a clinical psychologist, but it was the first time I suppose I became so aware of how, we couldn't have the privilege any more as academics of just teaching. So, a couple of years, so subsequently we became aware as a school of students sleeping in the libraries, so I think that was probably my next understanding of the general, and again how extensive it was, not one student or two students, how extensive the problem was around students who for whatever reasons. And again, there's a gender element to it, but particularly concerns around women students who were wondering around Braamfontein because they had nowhere to go.

(Prof Cooper, Senior Lecturer, Ivory Tower University)

After reviewing literature on gender and higher education in the mid-90s , Jacobs (1996) bemoaned the lack of adequate research attention of gender inequality within higher education institutions. He particularly cautioned against the tendency of scholars to sweep gender inequality under the carpet of racial and class inequality. He asserted that "the challenge is to situate gender inequality economically, historically, culturally, and politically" (Jacobs,1996, p177). Although much has changed in this regard since 1996, participants' narratives in this study call for a brighter research spotlight to be shone back on the ongoing disparities between the experiences of boys and girls in higher education. Several observed a clearly disproportionate weight of being working class in higher education between male and female students, with girls bearing the worst brunt.

7.3 Enabling Characteristics of Working-Class Students in Higher Education

Given the unlikely working-class graduates, what about the working-class students enables successful completion?

In contrast to the largely deficit view of working-class students in higher education as a risky investment, drawing from experiences of working-class graduates, scholars such as Yosso (2005), Mills (2008), Crozier and Reay (2011) and many others invite the research spotlight to the cultural wealth and dispositions that underwrite the transformative potential of this group of students in higher education. In her widely cited paper titled: *whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth*, Yosso (2005, p. 69) strongly advocates that we move away from the notion of working-class students "as full of cultural poverty disadvantages" and pay more attention to the often-overlooked cultural wealth of abilities, skills and social networks found in people from marginalised communities and households. Yosso outlines aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital as the various forms of capital derived from the community cultural wealth that students from working class origins and family background bring to higher education.

As a follow-up to participants' negative talk about working class students and what they 'lack' when they arrive in higher education, and to gain an understanding of factors potentially enabling the 'unlikely graduates' , I asked university managers, policy makers, student leaders , academic and support staff if this group of students brings anything at all that contributes positively towards their overall higher education experience and specifically their odds at successfully completing their studies. Participants' narratives support the potential benefits of learning from the cultural

wealth , dispositions and resourcefulness of working class students as advanced by Yosso (2005), Mills (2008), Crozier and Reay (2011) and many others. Importantly, participants' narratives suggest possibilities for how higher education institutions can build on what these students bring in order to improve their completion rates.

Despite the largely deficit view of working-class students in higher education, participants' narratives carried with them themes and sub-themes around the resourcefulness and transformative side of working-class students in higher education:

7.3.1 "… they do bring a lot of things; the challenge is whether or not we are willing to recognise what they bring as knowledge in itself and then to work with that knowledge: Working Class Community Cultural Wealth

All participating managers, policymakers, student leaders, academic and support staff acknowledged that, despite a plethora of what they lack, working-class students do not enter the field of higher education empty handed. Drawing from her experience as a tutor and later a senior lecturer at Ivory Tower University, Dr Kigali, posit that working-class students bring a valuable portfolio of capital and dispositions acquired from their working-class homes, communities, schooling experiences and pathways en route higher education. It is this wealth of capital and dispositions that the unlikely working-class graduates draw from in order to succeed in higher education. For her "*the challenge is whether or not we are willing to recognise what they bring as knowledge in itself and then to work with that knowledge".* From Dr Kigali's narrative, institutional conditions that undermine the wealth of capital and dispositions working class students bring to higher education are threefold:

- first, the wealth of capital and dispositions that working-class students bring to higher education are in a **different currency** to that possessed by their privileged counterparts, recognised, valued and rewarded by universities;

- Secondly, South African universities do not appear willing to recognise, value and reward what working class students bring to university as 'knowledge' or 'academic enough',

- and thirdly , that it takes rare 'agents of transformation' (Mills, 2008) within higher education institutions to reach out and meet this group of students half way, to either

recognise and reward what they bring or to facilitate a process of '**conversion' or 'translation'** of their working class wealth of capital and dispositions into the **'accepted currency'** and enable them to 'trade' or learn how to learn in higher education.

Professor Kigali posit that working-class students bring a wealth of knowledge easily accessible **only if universities can transform and diversify** what they recognise and reward as valid knowledge. This will in turn, she argues, significantly improve working class students' rate of completion in higher education.

In order to illustrate this point, Dr Kigali **suggested the use of multiple languages in class as an example of how a transformed classroom can access valuable knowledge by reaching out and meeting non-traditional groups of students halfway , particularly those who tend to be shy in fear of making language mistakes in front of their peers.** She cautioned:

> "*people like me who stand in front of the class, the mistake is that we assume that the silence is because there is lack of understanding whereas the silence is something else. The understanding is there… there is something that they {working class students] are coming with that we now need to be willing to meet with them halfway to be able to work with".*
>
> (Dr Kigali, Senior Lecturer, Ivory Tower University)

Drawing from her classroom experience at Ivory Tower University, Dr Kigali illustrated how working-class students respond positively when lecturers widen participation by recognising, teaching and valuing students with diverse forms of knowledge and dispositions regardless of the currency they are in.

7.3.2 …as bad as it is, their vulnerability gives them an edge: The positive effect of Navigational Capital and Aspirational Capital

Through the concepts of 'aspirational aapital' and 'navigational capital', Yosso (2005, p. 80) explains how working-class students bring to higher education a combination of "hope and dreams for the future in the face of real and perceived barriers" and tools necessary to manoeuvre through hostile social institutions that were "not created with communities of colour in mind". South African universities, with the exception of the recently established black universities, were not established with the black working-class masses in mind, a reality that presents stressful conditions

for black working-class students and limit their odds of successful completion (DHET, 2011). It follows therefore, that navigational capital, as described by Yosso (2005) , becomes a necessary resource to working class students to negotiate with South African higher education institutions.

Drawing from their classroom experience, Professor Ngoye and Professor Shulman, observed attributes of aspirational and navigational capital in the experiences of working-class students who go on to successfully complete their studies in institutions that violently subordinate and marginalise people like them. The observed and commended how, from their vulnerabilities, working-class students are able to draw inspiration, ambition, passion and the drive to persist in higher education. Prof Ngoye, Head of School at Merger University, marvelled at how working-class students *translate desperation and ambition into a kind of competence unknown and imponderable to the privileged:*

> *I think they bring desperation; desperation brings a level of ambition that is sort of much purer than someone who comes from a well-resourced background.* That ambition is a pure ambition that you won't that easily experience. *And that is a competency*, that is a drive that you don't get easily in someone that comes from a model C {middle class} school or a private school. *They have the ambition to reach heights because that's just how it is, everybody does that. But because of the levels of pressures they deal with there's a much greater passion and purity. I mean that's what I've experienced in many students over the years. I think that, as bad as it is, their vulnerability gives them an edge.*
>
> *Prof Ngoye, Head of School, Merger University*

Professor Shulman, also at Merger University, reiterated how working-class students are able to successfully navigate higher education by taking lessons from "home-based practices" such as fireside stories and stories heard on the radio or herding cattle and translate or convert them into literary practices that enables them to cope with the new and unfamiliar university environment. When I asked her to expand on this, she gave an example of how working-class students are able to convert miserable living conditions into a drive to escape the very miserable conditions:

MUKOVHE: I'm very interested in the second point that you've highlighted. The ability to translate home-based practices into a currency that can actually trade inside a University

PROF Shulman: Now if you read a wonderful book by McIntosh Polela called *My Father, My Monster*. His father killed his mother, they were quite well-off, I mean reasonably well-off living in the urban area. His father killed his mother through wife abuse. He was dumped on a granny in a rural area in the Eastern Cape and it was like just too miserable for words. Thirteen of them living together with little care and because he was this outsider, he was bullied. Now there was nothing there that could possibly be seen as promoting learning except for the desire to escape and misery.

7.3.3 "they have had to be tough, endure a lot of hardships … their enthusiasm compensates for their deficiencies, so to speak": The effects of Resistant Capital

Participants observed that, due to the hardships experienced growing up, working class students bring into higher education what Yosso (2005, p. 80) referred to as 'resistant capital', "knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality". Working class students are said to be brought up in families that grooms them to resist domination and feeling inferior. This form of cultural wealth empowers marginalized communities to grow thick skin under unfavorable conditions.

whilst you can position their situation as a disadvantage… in other ways we also see it as an advantage that these young people often have a level of resilience that other students don't have. So, they bring, you know, if you got to this stage growing up in a rural area, attending a rural school where often you didn't have the full complement of teachers, you didn't have a science lab, you didn't have an IT connectivity and you still manage to get to higher education, you're a special somebody probably. You really had some extra push. I think there's resilience, they have had to be tough, endure a lot of hardships, you know that Me as a middle-class white I could never fully understand because I've never lived through it but you know, I think that kind of resilience and toughness means that they can stick things out sometimes when there's difficulty at University, whereas others might fall away.

(Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Education Access Programme)

Encouragingly, Professor Benson, senior lecturer at Bush University, found the level of determination and enthusiasm working class students bring to his classroom to compensate for their weaknesses which, in turn, inspires him to go an extra mile in meeting them halfway and helping them learn to learn in higher education. Their enthusiasm to learn, in turn, becomes a critical enabler in the process converting their 'aspirational capital' and 'transformative habitus' (Mills,2008) into rewarded practices and trade in a manner that makes them succeed higher education.

> *On the positive side there are a good group student who are very enthusiastic ja who are enthusiastic to learn. So, in a way it compensates for the frustration on their deficiencies so to speak… for me as a person I felt that that is where the work is supposed to be done and also to, to sort of take the raw students and try to fix them up , to make them understand first of all why they need a good education and secondly what are their personal roles in achieving that for themselves you know…*
> *(Professor Benson, Senior Lecturer, Bush University)*

> *So, that's the kind of example that's cited. Then there's an example which came specifically from the Rurality Project, where the students have spoken about manual tasks. Tasks which urban people would think those are for adults, those aren't children's tasks but those students, because they were required to do these things and had to exercise a lot of adult behaviour and autonomy, this is the most cited, they came to University with far more resilience and strength than they would have had if they were from an urban area or molly coddled by their parents.*

> *(Prof Shulman, Academic staff, Merger University)*

7.3.4 Accumulation of resistant capital and solidarity of the working classes

Lugisani, student leader at Bush University, emphasized how social capital accumulation and the solidarity of the working classes in higher education becomes a form of cultural wealth and a strength amongst working class students. At the mainly working-class Bush University, participants felt social activities and networks born out of a sense of common origins help working class students to acquire social capital that contributes towards an improved higher education experience. It is in these social networks where struggling students are able to make friends with

mates who are in a position to help pull them up. One participant noted the unity across students from different tribal groups at Bush University as a strength.

> *"Bush University students are united, if we are saying we are going on the same cause, it doesn't matter who's leading them, we become united. We have a disability indaba that is where they go and learn that you don't have to discriminate and also on issues of gender, since we've had the department of gender at the University , the majority of students now they respect especially the LGBTI community. They used not to be respected, raped in the showers, being mocked, being labelled but now at the University if a student is gay, they understand them, they understand lesbians.*
>
> *(Lugisani, Student Leader, Bush University)*

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented a thematic narrative analysis of perceived enabling and disabling characteristics of working-class students in higher education through the eyes of university managers, policy makers, student leaders, academic and support staff at three different South African universities. The chapter reported on key stakeholder's lived experiences and perceptions to the question: What about working-class students diminishes their odds of completion at different South African HEIs? Two overarching themes emerged out of the coding process: reproductive characteristics of working-class students that hinder their odds of completion and transformative characteristic of working-class students that propel the unlikely graduates over the finish line. An analysis participants' lived experiences and perceptions of what working class students lack in higher education generated the following themes and subthemes summarised in the table below:

DISABLING CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS IN HE

I. Their NSFAS' Financial aid *moderates*, it does not *eliminate* the hindering effect of being of working-class background in higher education

- **<u>They come from "disrupted family circumstances:</u>**

…a *very small proportion of our students who come from home when mom and dad both are living at home, you know…Most times they're growing up with a mother headed household or a grandmother headed household, or an aunt headed household.* (Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Education Access Programme)

- **<u>Low Higher Education Aspirations and participation:</u>**

…their *"families that don't know what university is… they lack social structures that enable success"* (Martin, Manager, NSFAS)

… *they are growing up in families and communities where there was little aspiration for higher education.* (Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Education Access Programme)

II. Unequal classed and raced HE aspirations and choices

- *Higher education aspirations channelled by social class circumstances*

- Historic hierarchy and inequality between universities lives on through students' higher education "choices". …*there is something which I've picked when I was the Head of Department. When dealing with admission of students and I notice that for a good amount of our applicants Bush University was not their first choice. So, they've gone elsewhere and have been rejected and they come to Bush University*… (Prof Benson, Academic Staff, Bush University)

III. <u>Mismatch of academic and social expectations between HEIs and students:</u>

- … There is a mismatch between working class schooling experiences and universities' expectations of this group of students … their g*ood (high school) results don't translate into coping with university. So, we*

are dealing with students who are not ready to get on with the demands of University. (Professor Ngoye, Head of School, Merger University)

- *"I felt there was a gap in terms of knowledge base" (Prof Benson, Academic Staff, Bush University)*

- *"Their parents don't read, they don't read"* (Joshua, Policy Maker, REAP)

- It's a case of *"Mono-cultural origins Vs Multicultural higher education destinations" (*Joshua, Policy Maker, REAP)

IV. **Disempowering effects of students' working-class habitus at Ivory Towers**:

- Clash and mismatch between working class students' rural habitus vs elite institutional culture…rural schooling and family background are worlds-apart from Ivory Tower University's institutional culture and therefore rural working-class students feel *"inadequate", "anonymous" and "completely overwhelmed"* (Ms Parker, Senior Manager, Ivory Tower)

- *"lower income students did not fight back… they do not question authority… and are less likely to seek help"* (Dr Kigali, Senior lecturer, Ivory Tower University)

- "… *I think there is the issue of identity because if you feel out, you're less likely to seek the help you require. I mean, how many working-class students really go to their lecturers? as opposed to the middle class and entitled …"* (Professor Shulman, academic staff, Merger university)

- Clash and mismatch between working class students' rural habitus vs elite institutional culture…rural schooling and family background are worlds-apart from Ivory Tower University's institutional culture and therefore rural working-class students feel "inadequate", "anonymous" and "completely overwhelmed" (Ms Parker, Senior Manager, Ivory Tower)

- "lower income students did not fight back… they do not question authority… and are less likely to seek help" (Dr Kigali, Senior lecturer, Ivory Tower University)

- "… I think there is the issue of identity because if you feel out, you're less likely to seek the help you require. I mean, how many working-class students really go to their lecturers? as

opposed to the middle class and entitled …" (Professor Shulman, academic staff, Merger university)

V. The "pulling" effect of having to work whilst studying;

- *"a lot of them have come to speak to me, they're hoping to get jobs and they will come back …but they don't. That's the one thing I can say, they often don't… they say they'll come back, they don't". (*Professor Cooper, Senior Lecturer at Ivory University)

VI. Female working class students bare the worst brunt.

- *I felt pain because I saw girls that I knew coming back from outside, from selling their bodies because they don't have any funding* (Lugisani, Student Leader, Bush University)

Despite the largely deficit view of working-class students in higher education, participants' narratives carried with them themes and sub-themes around the resourcefulness and transformative side of working-class students in higher education. The table below summarizes participants" lived experiences and perceptions of positive dimensions of working-class students in higher education:

ENABLING CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS IN HE

I. Working-Class students do not enter the field of higher education empty handed;

- *"they (working-class students) do bring a lot of things; the challenge is whether or not we are willing to recognise what they bring as knowledge in itself and then to work with that knowledge".*

- *Working-class students thrive when universities* ***transform and diversify*** *what they recognise and reward as valid knowledge. They require the university to "meet them halfway".* (Professor Kigali, Senior lecturer, Ivory Tower University)

II. Capital accumulation and conversion: They "home-based practices" into "literary practices"

- *Professor Shulman, Academic Staff Merger University, and Professor Kigali , Senior Lecturer at Ivory Tower University, reiterated how working-class students are able to successfully navigate higher education by taking lessons from "home-based practices" such as fireside stories and stories heard on the radio or herding cattle and translate or convert them into literary practices that enables them to cope with the new and unfamiliar university environment.*

III. They draw from wealth of navigational capital

- They possess the ability to maneuver through social institutions not created with working class people in mind (Yosso, 2005).

- Their vulnerability gives them an edge: *I think they bring; desperation brings a level of ambition that is sort of much purer than someone who comes from a well-resourced background. But because of the levels of pressures they deal with there's a much greater passion and purity. I mean that's what I've experienced in many students over the years. I think that, as bad as it is, their vulnerability gives them an edge.*

- *they have had to be tough, endure a lot of hardships … (Joshua, Policy Maker, REAP)*

- *On the positive side there are a good group student who are very enthusiastic ja who are enthusiastic to learn. So, in a way it compensates for the frustration on their deficiencies so to speak… (Professor Benson, Senior Lecturer, Bush University)*

IV. Resistant Capital: They possess and benefit from solidarity of the working classes in higher education

- Resistant capital refers those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality (Yosso, 2005). At the mainly working-class Bush University, Mashudu, student leaders, observed how social activities and networks born out of a sense of common origin helped working class students acquire social capital that contributes towards an improved higher education experience.

- *"Bush University students are united, if we are saying we are going on the same cause, it doesn't matter who's leading them, we become united. We have a disability indaba that is where they go and learn that you don't have to discriminate and also on issues of gender, since we've had the department of gender at the University , the majority of students now they respect especially the LGBTI community.*

  (Lugisani, Student Leader, Bush University)

Chapter 8: The perceived role of HEIs in unequal patterns of attainment in higher education

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined narratives of narrative accounts of university managers, policy makers, student leaders, academic and support staff at three different universities for answers to the question: What about working-class students diminishes and/or improves their odds of completion at different South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)? Chapter 8 moves the focus of analysis away from the student towards the perceived role or contribution of different HEIs in working class attrition in higher education.

What about different South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) hinders working-class students' odds of completion in higher education?

In light of persistent inequality of attainment in South African higher education, numerous voices continue to call for HEIs to be transformed in a manner that is mindful of barriers imposed by one's social origins in order to for society to make meaningful advances towards a just and equitable higher education (Bowl,2001; Ball et al, 2002; Quinn, 2005; Nora and Arbona, 2007). Insights from participants in this study get us a step closer to an improved understanding of ways in which post-apartheid higher education, as it continues to evolve, reproduce or transform the class, race and gender-based inequality of attainment. In this chapter, narrative accounts of university managers, policy makers, student leaders, academic and support staff at three different universities are examined for themes, with a particular focus on their lived experiences and perceptions of different HEIs' institutional role in working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education. At this stage the focus of analysis has moved away from the voice of working-class graduates and dropouts, to narrative accounts of key stakeholders in the South African higher education community. The chapter is based on a thematic analysis the interviews I conducted with Heads of School, Registrars, Senior Lecturers, Student Leaders, Policy Makers, NSFAS Administrators/Managers and a Vice Chancellor at three historically and presently different learning contexts in South Africa: Bush University, Merger University and Ivory Tower University. The differences between these three universities were briefly explained in Chapter 6.

The following themes stand out in how university managers, policy makers, student leaders, academic and support staff perceive and narrate the role of South African HEIs in high non-completion and low completion rates amongst working-class students:

- NSFAS is hindering more than enabling completion amongst working-class students;
- South African HEIs is alienating to working class students in ways taken for granted;
    - South African HEIs are untransformed, unkind and quite harsh working-class students;
- Toxic student-faculty relations;
- Poorly managed transitions and integration;
- Unequal learning contexts: one system, different institutional experiences;
- Negligence and lack of institutional accountability over working class dropout "bloodbath";
- No real institutional transformation, more "window dressing";
- Working-class students mostly 'pushed' more than 'pulled' out of higher education.

8.2 The perceived role of HEIs in unequal patterns of attainment

8.2.1 NSFAS is hindering more than enabling working class students' odds of completion

An important theme to emerge from participants' narratives is that, despite its noble objectives, due to its policy and administrative deficiencies, the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is hindering more than it has enabling working-class students' odds of completion across HEIs. Given the socio-economic profile of its beneficiaries, participants charged NSFAS with worsening the experience of vulnerable students in an already unwelcoming and unkind higher education environment. NSFAS was established by the South African Government to enable youth from working class households and communities to access and succeed in higher education (DHET,2011). This policy position is based on South Africa's post-apartheid objective and belief that the increased higher education access and success of working-class youth will not only transform the composition of the student population to reflect the country's demographics, but also fundamentally reverse the socio-economic legacy of colonialism and apartheid which has and

continues to polarize South Africa into one of the most unequal societies in the world. The high non-completion rate amongst NSFAS beneficiaries continues to threaten the achievability of this historic and supreme task bestowed on the South African field of higher education.

Participants further identified dimensions of the NSFAS's policy, management and administration they deem to be hindering the odds of its beneficiaries to successfully complete their studies:

a. NSFAS has not keep pace with growing working-class demand for higher education

As a policy maker, university manager and former Board Member of NSFAS , Dr Kate identified the absence of sound and updated administrative systems, required financial expertise, universities' autonomous and unaccountable say over the distribution of funds, and government's lack of appreciation of the mammoth task bestowed on NSFAS as some of the key triggers behind the scheme's policy and administrative deficiencies from inception:

> *So, let's talk about it from when I was in the board of NSFAS and from the perspective of the department. First of all, NSFAS began as a very small, like a home industry, you know, it sort of grew, and the systems and the administrative systems required and all the kind of financial expertise required did not keep pace at all. In fact, it was an area of extreme frustration for me. Systemically, I don't think anyone had taken cognisance of the fact that with the department's mandate to widen access to higher education and to literally open the doors to learning, nobody had really done a proper costing of how NSFAS should be funded…I mean in my mind that stands out as being the biggest failure, was the fact that it was underfunded, the systems had not grown, it was still being like there were paper files of students you know, and it was a loan system but it was not a bank; it was giving credit but not with responsibility, but then there's always the question, if you provide the promise of access, then you either do it properly or you don't do it.*
>
> (Dr Kate, Senior Manager and Policy Maker, Merger University)

Dr Kate further recalled "*feeling compromised*" and "*frustrated"* as a university manager when her personal belief in widening access to working class students clashed with what she deemed to be universities' unjust and out of touch institutional practices that derailed students' higher education

experience. She singled out universities' then autonomous discretion over the use of NSFAS funds as a source of great injustice to the students.

b. "You think you are in a program; you think you are funded by NSFAS. In the middle of nowhere, the funding is no longer forthcoming".

Aluna, support staff at Ivory Tower University, shared her frustrations with how the NSFAS' administrative deficiencies undermine student success. Drawing from her personal experience as a member of support staff dealing with food insecurity on campus, Aluna strongly denounced NSFAS's overall funding model and practices that undermine working class students' odds of completing their studies. The first destructive NSFAS practice she identified is "**top slicing".** Top slicing refers to the practice of partially funding eligible students which occurs when the number of NSFAS qualifying students at a particular university is higher than the funds allocated by government to that university. This is common in elite institutions where university fees are higher than NSFAS allocations per student. For example, a student receives a grant for tuition and stationery, and she has to raise funds for accommodation and meals by herself.

> *So… from my experience, I have experienced people who are on NSFAS still lacking, okay. My understanding from what I see anecdotally right, is that NSFAS doesn't cover students completely. They actually do not have the best model for supporting students, that's my feeling. So, for example you still get students that come and says okay, NSFAS gives me tuition. So, what are they supposed to do when they're considered low income and in need? how would they have gotten a NSFAS tuition allowance but not accommodation and not food? So, for me that's very telling. That NSFAS clearly is not working for that individual. Then you would get students who would get accommodation, tuition and a stipend, but a stipend that can barely provide food for the students. So, the very students who would be on the NSFAS full scheme would also need support for food. It's from my experience, many people who receive NSFAS are not covered totally. And of course, there are many students who have been rejected by NSFAS, so they are, we're called self-funded students, which are not self-funded because they do not have family incomes that are high enough.*
>
> (Aluna, Support Staff, Ivory Tower University)

Aluna's account was also advanced by Lugisani, a student leader at Bush University:

> *…you find that they send you an SMS saying you've been funded. But at the end of the day you will keep on calling NSFAS and from January until December you find that you are not funded at all.*
>
> (Lugisani, Student Leader, Bush University)

Drawing from government's 2011 ten-year review report on NSFAS, Dr Kate also felt that the inadequacy of NSFAS due to partial funding has become a "trap" for poor and working-class students who have no other source of income:

> *So, I mean that report itself identified that it's that trap, you know, you get money to go to University, but not enough, I mean all of that was quite clear and I think the concept of the hungry student or the student without access to books or the student without access to laptops or being unable to even in some cases access lectures, because it would cost you to actually get to campus. So, it was cheaper for you to sit at home and get notes from someone. But that itself would contribute, especially in subjects where you actually needed tactile learning, you know. Learning which required you to be in the classroom to practice, to whatever. So, those were some of the issues which I think contributed.*
>
> (Dr Kate, Senior Manager, Merger University)

Aluna characterised NSFAS's funding model as self-defeating, out of touch with "very real South African situations", hindering success and consequently shuttering working-class dreams in higher education, with students in their first year of study hit the hardest. She found NSFAS's continuous-funding criteria to be contradictory and not sensitive to working-class students' realities in higher education. To illustrate this point , Aluna pulled out her note book and started quoting cases that get reported to her office daily by struggling NSFAS funded working class students:

> *So a student gets an official letter at the beginning of the year saying that he is fully funded on NSFAS, whatever that means. In September he gets told that he's actually not getting any NSFAS funding because he's not a South African citizen. So, whether that was administered or not, it has messed up a student's whole year. So, here is an engineering student, no stipend,*

he gets NSFAS for tuition, he is doing engineering first year. And it's usually the first-year students who, it's that much harder because they're adjusting to University life. They only have tuition, they now have to find accommodation, they have to find food, they don't know services that may be available. So, it could be May that they actually realize that they could have support somewhere which is problematic and it obviously contributes to their lack of success in the academic year. And very often I think one of the things that is quite important here is that if they got NSFAS funding last year but they failed two courses or failed one course, then they would not get it {NSFAS} the next year. So, that means they're sitting with a loan from NSFAS for the first year, they've been prevented from continuing with more support to actually make sure that they finish. So, they are in debt and they have not completed their degree. Now what happens to that student? There's no hope.

So, another one, passed all courses in 2016 but NSFAS rejected, mother Swazi, father South African. People who have applied for NSFAS come July, they've had no response but they're on campus. So, they started the year having applied to NSFAS, thinking that they're going to get approved and they get no response, or they get a response saying you're not {approved}. By then you're half way through {the year}. So, there are all these communications of NSFAS {status} that are problematic.

(Aluna, Support Staff, Ivory Tower University)

The negative impact of top slicing on the wellbeing of working-class students and their odds of completing their studies is worsened at the under-resourced and predominately working-class Bush University where NSFAS eligible students are as high as 85% of the overall student population. Bush University an almost exclusively working-class student population and receive the least amount of financial resources from government. One NSFAS administrator at Bush University recalled how for the past five years they could only allocate eligible students 75% of their tuition fee, no food, stationery or housing allowances, which in turn led to "so many dropouts" :

No previously we had so many drop outs, especially here at the Bush University because you will find out we have 7 000 students who have applied and our allocation is less that eligible students, it means we won't give the student 100% {full cost of study]. It means we would have to compromise…Sometimes we used to give them 75% of their tuition only, not meals, not what, just tuition…imagine a student coming from poor families, they have

nothing. After that 75% that we have paid the student still has that {25%}, they cannot be able to pay that. It means the student is going to drop out.

(Ms Modise, NSFAS Administrator, Bush University)

c. "NSFAS is just a funding scheme…"

Prof Ndebvu decried how the NSFAS had reduced itself as "*just a funding scheme"* when compared to other public and private bursaries and scholarships that provide comprehensive support befitting to the comprehensive needs of working-class students in higher education. This weakness was sufficient evidence, he argued, that the scheme was not in touch with the working classness of its beneficiaries.

I think NSFAS must just become organised. It must become organised. For example, we are still dealing with issues of NSFAS admin now, they have not given us the loan agreements, they have not done that and this is April. The second issue , is that NSFAS is just a "funding scheme". You know when Anglo gives you a bursary, they also organise education events and so on, maybe is our responsibility as the university. But I think NSFAS should pay a little bit more attention to students, Because otherwise if it is just a facilitator of loans, you know , you might as well get the department of finance or DHET to distribute the money , there has to be some form of value that NSFAS is adding to students life , (beyond giving money) and at the moment I don't see that value. For me they are just the middle man, we (university) do almost all of the vetting, and we give them the names and then they distribute the money to us.

(Prof Ndebvu, Senior Manager, Merger University)

d. "Its April now and there are some people who have just gotten an approval from NSFAS a week ago"

Professor Ngoye, Head of School at Merger University, laid the dropout blame on NSFAS's delayed processing and communicating of funding applications outcomes which he felt adversely affect working class students' transition, adjustment and integration at higher education institutions. Given that the academic year in South Africa commences in February, students who

receive their funding application status in April would have gone two months on campus without any form of funding or support. He further argued effect of NSFAS's delayed processing and communicating of funding applications outcomes worsened school-university gap and overall transition experience for new working-class entrants:

> *With regard to the dropout rates of NSFAS recipients… generally NSFAS applications are processed very late. At this point in time when we have commenced term two but you still have students who were supposed to have registered in January, NSFAS only approved their funding right now. It's better if the funding is secured and confirmed at least at the beginning of the year already ,so that you start the term…some people are from rural areas, they still need to learn how to use Blackboard (university's online platform), they still need to learn how to type their assignments and most of those interventions happen at the very beginning of the year. So, if you come now, you're assisted by a tutor to catch up. You've already missed the term's work and that really creates problems. I think if they can streamline the funding processes, if they can move with speed. If they can allocate the resident fee at least while they are processing the rest …Its April now and there are some people who have just gotten an approval from NSFAS a week ago. They have not registered. They were not in the system. They will catch up with all the term's work.*
>
> *And remember that they are first years and they are coming to University for the first time. So, they are so used to teachers holding their hands. Right now, they need to know that they have to move from this politics lecture, to the anthropology lecture, to the geography lecture and they must make arrangements with of all these individual lecturers for their help to catch up. That is part of the problem that contributes to the dropout especially in term one and term two courses. I'm sure they'll be fine in term three and term four that because they are already in the system, they will know what… I think the approval also might be the problem.*
>
> (Professor Ngoye, Head of School, Merger University)

e. Working-class students *"rely on this system that just doesn't work."*

Joshua's organisation, the Rural Education Access Programme, was established by the Catholic Church to facilitate rural youth's access and success in higher education. His organisation essentially fills some of the gaps in NSFAS policy by providing continuous on campus support

programme, psycho-social support, work readiness programmes and food and stationary stipends to NSFAS funded rural working-class students. Joshua's almost entirely negative account of his experience with NSFAS over the years captured participants' overall experience with NSFAS and how it has hindered more than enabled working-class completion in South African higher education:

> *Well obviously, it's hugely problematic. I mean I can write a book on the inadequacies of NSFAS.* .
>
> (Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Education Access Programme)

f. NSFAS as a trigger of sectoral instability and the #FeesMustFall Protests

As a student leader at Bush University during the #FeesMustFall higher education funding crisis, Lugisani narrated a perspective of the student leadership during the time of instability and a major policy shake up in South African field of higher education. She identified students' historic debt incurred due to being partial funded (top slicing) by NSFAS , delayed distribution of accommodation and food allowances, disregard for Historically Disadvantaged Universities (HDIs), and complete failure of the Scheme's administration as core areas of dysfunctionality in NSFAS's funding model that not only continue to hinder working class students' efforts to complete their studies but also contributed to the #FeesMustFall protests in her university.

Lugisani further decried NSFAS's complete disregard for disabled students who , in theory , are supposed to be prioritised:

> *… the majority of students living with disabilities were not funded. I remember there was a lady that used to be carried with a towel to go and attend classes and mind you that student, NSFAS was saying she's funded, she didn't even have a wheelchair to go to class. And remember when you are under disability you need, immediately when NSFAS first funds you, you must make sure that you get accommodation at the University. Food allowance because some {disabled} students can't cook for themselves. {As a disabled student} you must get assistive devices. It's either if you*

are partially sighted they will make sure that you get a large print, you get a laptop which is having Jaws…we raised the issue with NSFAS but no one assisted us because they told us that no one is working with the students with disabilities

(Lugisani, Student Leader, Bush University)

8.2.2 A field alienating in ways taken for granted

Dr Kigali, senior lecturer at Ivory Tower University, found HEIs alienating to working-class students in ways taken or granted. She singled out the perceived universal accessibility of language and *"certain styles of communication"* to all students as an example of salient yet hidden ways in which universities alienate working class students in ways taken for granted. She added that such alienation leads to "*a sense of disconnect that happens and the students slowly begins to dis-identify".* Professor Kigali drew from her lecturing experience to tell a classroom story that exemplifies this point:

So, there are many ways that this space or the institution is alienating in a way that we would take for granted. So, we take little things for granted. If I give another example, there was a reading that I prescribed for my students and for me it was such a basic reading, it should have been accessible to everyone. What I took for granted was that in the reading the author tends to speak through metaphors and again it was metaphors that I took for granted, because I know those metaphors. The rest of the class seems to be comfortable with those metaphors. But if you're not in a culture that engages those metaphors, mind you, already you're trying to engage the reading in terms of a different language, now you have to engage the reading in terms of the metaphor which is its own language, so it's multiple layers of access that you need just to engage that reading. So, for me that's why I'm saying the alienation cuts across different levels that we take for granted. It's not just a social alienation or institutional spaces. It's these kinds of little things that you take for granted. And so, if that builds up, it leads to a sense of disconnection. So, you prescribe that reading for this week, then the next week it's another reading, and it just builds up. There's a sense of disconnect that happens and the students slowly begins to dis-identify. But even beyond the engagement with the texts, there are also, the kinds of engagements that happen on a very interpersonal level, and maybe it's a confidence thing, but for me it's a lot more than that. So, there are certain styles of communication that we also, take for granted.

(Dr Kigali, Senior Lecturer, Ivory Tower University)

8.2.3 *"We are untransformed, unkind and quite harsh on our students"*: Toxic faculty-student relations

Professor Ndebvu highlighted harsh and toxic student-faculty relations as one of the institutional conditions hindering working-class success in higher education. Class, racial and gender discrimination is said to be feeding into the daily alienation of this working-class students across universities. Drawing from his experiences in the classroom, Prof Ndebvu felt South African higher education needed to transform the face of academic staff in order to improve black working class students' overall higher education experience and odds of success:

> *I think the thing that really actually stood out was the fact that it is important for students to have somebody that they can look up to who looks like them. I'll give you an example, when I was at Ivory Tower University all the black students when they have problems in the Department of Electrical Engineering, they would come to me. Now the big question is , before I came there as a professor and by the way they have not replaced me with a black South African… they still don't have a black South African Professor… so, what would these young people have been if I was not there.*
>
> *The second memorable thing was that the people who dropped out when I was teaching or who would have dropped out were not necessarily people who were not smart…and by the way, do actually our professors and our lecturers take it as their role to be able to, to give confidence to their students?….confidence is something that you should not take for granted you know. Confidence basically just means you have somebody who actually thinks you are smart you know, he thinks you are smart you can be able to do it when you give up he'll tell you that "hey man you can do it" you know…I mean I still remember when I was a young student I think doing second year and we were taking a course called dynamics it's a rough course. It's a rough course. And the professor came and say to all of us in class "please don't give up , things are going to be easier when we start doing vibration", so he knew that it is a difficult course.*
>
> *We are untransformed, unkind and quite harsh on our students.*
>
> (Prof Ndebvu, Senior Manager, Merger University)

Academic staff who do not inspire confidence their students and are out of touch with the reality of working-class students they teach were blamed for the silent and often overlooked alienation of working-class students at South African universities. Martin, Senior Manager at NSFAS, narrated how racist members of the academic staff pride themselves in making life miserable for black working-class students:

> *Academics have made it exciting for them to know that kids are not going to progress and therefore they've used the white man's mentality to motivate, "there are a thousand of you , look to the person on your left, look at the person on your right, they won't be here, you'll be on your own". It's a scare tactic. Now most of these kids believe those things as gospel, and therefore they say "I'm not going to amount to anything"*
>
> (Martin, Senior Manager, NSFAS)

A student leader at Bush University revealed the gendered dimension of the toxic student-faculty relations and how some lecturers go to an extent of sexually harassing vulnerable female working class students:

> *And recently there were cases of lecturers telling students that you don't have money, if you want to pass it means we should do what, have sexual intercourse. That lecturer forgot which girl he slept with, he slept with almost the entire class, he failed a wrong girl, the girl had pictures and other things, she went and opened a case, the other girl fell pregnant, she also opened a case for a lecturer, they had to be expelled.*
>
> (Lugisani, Student Leader, Bush University)

Additionally, participants also felt that the toxic student-faculty relations are worsened by the country's "horrendous" staff to student ratio:

> *But another issue is our staff to student ratio is horrendous. South African universities are big in terms of students size. Which It probably is an indication that we never really invested in higher*

education as much as we should have….and it makes sense because if you look at the number students at universities today and compare them to the number of universities when Apartheid was still around, so my understanding is that we have only built two only new Universities. The apartheid model was based under the assumption that black South Africans were not going to university. Now when we came with the new dispensation what we did was to say that we're going to put everybody into these 24 universities. I mean the University of Johannesburg has 50 000 students, so staff to student ratio is a big issue.

*(*Prof Ndebvu, Senior Manager, Merger University)

8.2.4 The transition Year *"very very unjust"*: SA HEIs not ready for working class students

There is a general feeling that working class students' transition period is poorly managed across HEIs. The first year of study is widely considered the most challenging year in students' higher education journey which can either make or break one's post schooling dreams (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Participants widely held that, despite the widening participation and transformation policy commitments, South African universities remained unprepared for students from working class families and schooling backgrounds. Professor Ndebvu, Senior Manager at Merger University, drew comparisons between their higher education experiences elsewhere in the world to illustrate how South African universities are not paying sufficient attention to the critical transitional first year of study, which in turn reduce working class students' odds of successfully completing their studies. He recounted how the American University he attended paid particular attention and emphasis to the first year of study in order to improve student integration and reduce the odds of non-completion:

… they (American universities) make an assumption that when a person come for their first year of study, it's a big transition. The other things was obviously that you (as a first year student) have to stay on campus. At the least on your first semester because they want to manage that transition. After that you can move and stay wherever you like. It's a system that is designed with an intended goal of getting people to succeed. And when I arrived in the united states there was about a 100 of us and very few of us if any dropped out.

*(*Prof Ndebvu, Senior Manager, Merger University*)*

At Ivory Tower University, Aluna found the transition year to be 'very very unjust" to working - class students. She charged Ivory Tower University as unreceptive and ill-prepared for students from diverse high schools, thereby punishing working rural youth who do not arrive on the same footing as their elite counterparts. In her narrative, Aluna particularly decried universities' lack of appreciation for the mental health issues that accompany the gruesome transitional year for working class students.

> *Well I think just in terms of the transition to University and the lack of absolute support in the first year. And I don't just mean support for food and housing and that kind of thing, I mean academic support. I think the university tries to do programs at the residences, they try to do other programs, but I think a lot more needs to be invested in the transitional year … because students are coming from a kind of broad spectrum of high schools. So, you have the high schools in rural areas, those kids don't have the experience, the exposure that a kid would have even in a public school in the city of Johannesburg for example. So, they don't come here on the same footing. So, you know, already they come here, you know, disadvantaged. And then when they are here they have to be dealing with social issues and NSFAS money and even that stipend can go to the families for food and that kind of thing. So, it becomes really difficult. I really believe that everyone's not coming to University first year on the same footing.*
>
> *I think that we can provide a lot more support, academic work is stringent, student have emotional breakdowns… they end up with psychiatric diagnosis and we're quite punitive about psychiatric stuff. If you had a medical, you had a broken leg, then of course you couldn't come to write, but if you have a breakdown, if you're mentally ill then you're shunned and ostracised and you don't get a good deal. You know, you won't get a good response. So, I think overall, it's just very very unjust.*
>
> (Aluna, Support Staff, Ivory Tower University)

8.2.5 Unequal learning contexts: *Dominant, Intermediate, and a Subordinate tier*:

Despite the country's policy commitment towards transformation and equity between and within South African HEIs; Ivory Tower University, Bush University and Merger University represent very different and unequal learning contexts in South Africa. These institutions differ significantly in their histories, traditions, geographic locations, institutional missions, subject offerings and perceived status. Consequently, these universities attract different groups of students with uneven high school leaving grades, social and ethnic origin and portfolio of capitals, who in turn go through widely unequal higher education experiences depending on the type of institution they manage to get into.

Naidoo (2004) configured the historic and hierarchical composition of South African Higher education into three tiers: "dominant tier", "intermediate tier", and a "subordinate tier". On top of the hierarchy is the dominant tier which consist of well-endowed, research intensive, world-renowned and elite English-medium universities originally established exclusively for white English-speaking South Africans under colonial and apartheid laws. Ivory Tower University falls within this category of institutions. The intermediate tier consisted of relatively well-endowed Afrikaans-medium universities originally established exclusively for white Afrikaans speaking students, some of whom merged with historically black universities to form what become known as mergers. Merger university falls within this category. The subordinate tier consisted of the mostly rural based and grossly under resourced universities reserved for blacks only. Bush University falls within this category of institutions. These institutions are generally referred to as Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) or Historically Black Institutions (HBIs).

What has emerged from participants' narratives is that although universities' race-based admission policies were outlawed after the country's 1994 democratic dispensation, the hierarchy between institutions has been and continues to be reproduced and reinforced in multiple ways. Participants decried the persistence of academic, financial, status and geographic hierarchy between universities and the unfair systemic advantage that continues unfairly elevate elite institutions and the students they enrol above others. Bush University is an example of how, 25 years since 1994, the 'subordinate tier' remains at the bottom of the pyramid in terms of financial resources, infrastructure, research capacity and perceived status when compared to institutions in the 'intermediate' and 'dominant' tier. Quite markedly, while the ethnic composition of intermediate

and dominate tier institutions has transformed, subordinate tier institutions such as Bush Universities shoulder the bulk of black working-class student enrollment.

Professor Benson, Senior Lecturer at Bush University, felt that students at predominantly black working-class Bush University *"are not getting the best out of the university"* due to a culture of mismanagement, lack of adequate resources and the lack of seriousness with which academic and support staff take the core business of the university. He complained about the *"support staff of the university who are not properly orientated on what the university's main goal is*":

> *So, for example I go to a class to teach I've prepared some slides to show, you know, the student some slides. To show them a short movie, a short cartoon to maybe bring home a principle. I get there and the plugs are not working… The plugs not working I call maintenance, and nobody picks up the phone. Then after class you go and log a complaint, and nobody shows after one week. For me, if a teacher cannot teach that should be an emergency. But nobody shows up you know. You know, so you get the type of thing, the culture, as you are asking, for me is really a cornerstone… this leads to students not getting the best out of the university…Let's assume they have the deficiencies, they are here for us to form them up. If we are not making that effort enough then it's no more the students' fault… infrastructure…. So for example I was the head of the Department of Microbiology, but we did not have lab space proper for the department. So, I need to borrow lab space from other biological sciences departments you know to set up practices. And which means that we had to find alternative times in the week and on weekends to do that since of course those labs were used for all , had been occupied had been used in the week by those who own them properly.*

Unequal distribution of resources between institutions was emphasised as another area of hierarchy and inequality between HEIs, with elite and historically endowed institutions receiving a disproportionality larger share of the country's higher education budget compared to their counterparts at historically disadvantaged and subordinate institutions. Professor Ngoye , Head of School at Merger University, found this trend contradictory to government's expressed policy commitments towards equity and justice in post-apartheid higher education. Lugisani, student leader at Bush University, called out the massive differences in food stipend received by her students at Bush University when compared to those at elite institutions such as Ivory Tower university.

> *… we only use one machine at the library one printing machine the whole University. Now there are sixteen thousand students. Like every year we add one thousand. Every year. So, it's not enough, including the library, it's not enough. Lecture halls some of them don't have tables, chairs. Yes, especially those who are doing Education, it's tough. Some you find them sitting down {on the floor}, what is happening in classrooms is what is happening in the rooms. One day when you are free you will go to the prefabs and you see the situation, it's painful.*
>
> *(Lugisani, Student Leader, Bush University)*

Similarly, a senior manager at NSFAS complained about how, due to massive differences in cost between universities, year in year out he finds himself paying billions of rands towards already endowed elite institutions compared to a few millions he pays towards historically disadvantaged universities who accept and accommodate the most vulnerable of the student population. Dr Miri, a senior lecturer at Bush University, pointed at the overcrowded lecture theatres at Bush University to illustrate how institutions catering for the working classes continue to be grossly under resourced when compared infrastructure at their elite counterparts:

> *… a lecture theatre which accommodates only 60 students? They end up sitting in that lecture hall, 140. I am talking about 260 students. They are packed in one venue… It is a serious crisis. Even now if you have time just go and walk around. You'll see students attending, standing outside of the lecture hall. You can't even hear the lecturer. You can't see the lecturer. You can't see when he is writing on the board, what do you expect from that child? He will attend five minutes and realise that I am just wasting my time here, standing outside of the lecture hall, I can't see the lecturer, I can't see nothing, so what am I doing here? And they will go and sit in front of the building playing cards*
>
> (Dr Miri, Senior Lecturer, Bush University)

The consequence of the gross inequality of resources between university not only negatively the wellbeing of working-class students but has also demoralised academic staff and has led to an exodus of academic staff away from under sourced institutions such Bush University to what they deem to be better resourced institutions. One participant felt that, consequently, what is left at historically disadvantaged institutions the death of "the culture of scholarship… on the side of the

teaching business" and the raise of the university as "an employment agency".

> *I will submit that a good number of lecturers don't read anymore …because…in the first place perhaps, it's not even requested of them you know so you don't have any reason to do that. I would take that another step back and to say that if a university sees itself as an employment agency instead of an engine for knowledge generation and training then and the culture of scholarship will never be established … in general I will say we are lagging behind that culture of scholarship. You know because the culture of scholarship is something that it is sort of contagious and students pick that up on as well. And of course, that will impact on their outputs. You know, there's no way you know, so if you have a good number of your lecturers or professors who are not as aspirant scholars that will impact the students… You know directly there's no two ways about that.*
>
> (Prof Benson, Academic Staff, Bush University)

8.2.6 Institutional negligence and lack of accountability over working class dropout "bloodbath"

With only the academically exceptional working-class minority accessing higher education, Professor Ndebvu, Senior Manager at Merger University, saw the dropout "bloodbath" amongst this group of students as an outcome of HEIs' negligence and the sector's lack of accountability in post-apartheid South Africa.

> *And the likes of Ivory Tower University take the top 0.5% achievers and do not know what to do with them. And those people with A aggregate are dropping out! You see I think one of the mistakes that we made as a country after the transition (from apartheid) is that we never held universities accountable until now. It seems like half of your class can fail and its okay. Here in South Africa, a person will have half of his class failing and there is no consequences. When half of your students fail, there must be a very good explanation as to what have you done? Didn't you realise that your class was failing? what mechanisms did you put in place when you realised that? And if it was business as usual, then we have a problem...and then monitoring and evaluation is quite Key. A dean must not know that a class is going to have a bloodbath (only) at the end of the year, when you write test the Dean must look at it , and I can tell you these deans are not looking at these tests, so that's they can intervene. The dean must be able to tell me that these are*

my courses that are difficult and these are my courses that are easy because in every discipline you have easy courses and you have difficult courses…

(Prof Ndebvu, Senior Manager, Merger University)

Prof Lwandani, Head of School at Merger University, highlighted the pervasive prevalence of food insecurity amongst working class students across HEIs and its adverse impact on their odds of completing their studies as example of institutional negligence and lack of accountability with regard to high rates of working-class non-completion:

"*Hunger is a big thing. There's a food security issue, no doubt about it. You see tiredness, hunger, you know the kind of passiveness you get when you're not eating, you see all kinds of entrepreneurial activities, guys trying to sell textbooks".* (Prof Lwandani, Head of School, Merger University)

8.2.7 Mental health, suicide and the horror of being a 'dropout' across HEIs

"the brother that was caught cheating committed suicide by jumping in front of a train"
(Professor Lwandani, Head of School at Merger University)

Professor Lwandani blamed and placed universities' failure to adequately address the "dropout bloodbath" at the centre the recent spike in student mental health issues and reported cases of university students committing suicide across South Africa HEIs. The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) identified suicide as one of the leading causes of death among university students. One of their studies suggested that as many as 20% of university students experience suicidal thoughts during their higher education journey.

Joshua, Policy Maker at REAP, attributed the dropout horror to societal shame and stigma that has been attached to students who dropout:

"So, actually you're not doing a young person any favour if all you're doing is getting them into the system. If they don't complete actually and they fail and they return home, they're almost worse

off than if they had never started and certainly under the former with NSFAS system they go home with debt, they haven't completed, they're embarrassed, they're humiliated, they've wasted two or three years of their lives, they feel they're a failure, you know. Actually that's, you haven't done them a favour at all if you get them in but they don't complete {their studies}".

(Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Education Access Programme)

Professor Lwandani, Head of School at Merger University, told a story about how the shame attributed to failure and dropping out pushed one of his students to take his own life by jumping in front of a moving train:

So, years ago we had, at Ivory Tower University still, we had these two boys from Venda who were really nice guys and what had happened is there was an exam that was written … hey may have been second year. They, the two twins and very hard-working, very friendly guys and there's one exam where a student alerted the lecturer of cheating happening by one of them. And she then went over the lecturer and saw that he in fact was cheating, he had notes underneath his script … you could see the immense stress on this kid's face, really immense. And afterwards he just came to her and said what is going to happen to me? And weeks went by, we heard nothing. And eventually the brother also disappeared for a while and then we finally heard that the brother that was caught cheating committed suicide by jumping in front of a train. So, and one of the reasons were that the whole family were putting their finances and resources towards these two boys and the one couldn't cope with the pressure and he then ultimately was, I mean it's a choice but at the same time also sort of forced to cheat just to relieve this pressure and get caught and he felt it was just too much to disappoint himself, his brother, his family, everybody, that he would rather die. So, I think that's one of the, I think the enormous pressure that they face. It's probably one of the biggest things.

(Professor Benson, Head of School, Merger University)

8.2.7 "We are not transforming; we are window dressing"

I asked university managers, policy makers, student leaders, academic and support staff across the three universities if , in their experience, the South African field of higher education was transforming or reproducing inequality. The overwhelming feeling was that, in the main, South African universities are reproducing inequality. Those more pessimistic pointed out that loud policy commitments to transforming higher education and society in general mask dominant forces' determination to self-preservation and maintenance of domination both in higher education and in society as a whole

At Ivory Tower University, Dr Kigali and Aluna were a lot more sceptical and accused elite institutions in particular of 'window-dressing' and masking persistent domination and reproduction of class, racial and cultural inequality under transformation talk:

> *We're talking. We're window-dressing. Well, I can't speak for other institutions, but what is happening here at Wits is that we're definitely transforming. I mean, we've jumped on the bandwagon of decolonisation and whatnot, but the way we've done it is that, we're starting with the assumption that the foundation is not a problem. You know – who is this person? – Audrey Lorde who says the master's tools can never, "you cannot rebuild the house with the master's tools, you need new tools". And what transformation looks like now is that we're trying to rebuild with the same tools. So, at the end of the day it's going to look like ...*
>
> Dr Kigali, Academic Staff, Ivory Tower University

> *I think they're transforming very slowly. And I think they're doing it also, my personal view, just to meet certain quotas.*
>
> Aluna, Support Staff, Ivory Tower University

Joshua, Dr Kate and Professor Cooper, on the other hand, sat "somewhere in the middle" , they felt there were noticeable pockets transformation:

> *So, in terms of reproducing patterns of inequality, I think I sit somewhere in the middle there. So, I think that we need to give credit where credit is due, look at the massification of higher education in South Africa, which has certainly happened a lot along, as it has globally, and the change in student demographics, which I think is a credit to the Universities and the Government. I don't think that we should deny that there has been huge change in the demographics of student populations in South Africa. So, that's the positive side and I think that Universities are transforming from that point of view.I think the fact that the University is an alienating environment is one of the first things we need to address. And I think we've done a very bad job of that because I think what we've managed to do is alienate all students unfortunately, and I find that very sad. That instead of finding the University a haven, a home, it seems that all students are racially more divided than they've ever been, I think that hasn't necessarily made black students feel more at home, it certainly made white students feel less at home, but I think what it has done is alert those old faculty like myself to the fact that it, the University is not as we experienced it and we need to be aware of that.*
>
> (Professor Cooper, Academic Staff, Ivory Tower University)

> *Look again, very hard to generalise but I always thought in general the trend is positive. I think it's certainly on the agenda of most institutions. Yes, it may not be at the pace that you would want and in the same way that you would want at various institutions, but I think you know, the conversation is alive and kicking and institutions are doing their best but many of them are under resourced and just struggling to survive*
>
> (Joshua, Policy Maker, Rural Access Education Programme)

> *"some institutions have transformed better than others".*
> (Dr Kate, Senior Manager, Merger University**)**

8.2.8 Pushed dropouts: ***"…its symbolic violence that results in a real violence"***

Non-completion amongst students is defined and understood differently amongst scholars. Others call is dropping out, discontinuation, withdrawal, disengagement, etc. In the literature, first, the focus is often the external factors that *pull* students out of higher education and there is often an implied sense of agency on the part of the student in the decision to exit higher education. Secondly, there is an implied presence of 'choice' on the part of the student. For example, a student decides to discontinue her studies in favour of an employment opportunity that has presented itself. In this example, we can see 'employment' as a pull factor and the student 'deciding' to pursue work over her studies. In their 2005 study of the dropout challenge in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Island, Jocey Quinn and her colleagues focussed exclusively on *'working-class students who choose to leave before completion'.*

Given my experience as a former member of Ivory Tower University's Council for Readmissions Committee, I am familiar with the rarely spoken about *push* form of dropout whereby a student who fails an often-unspecified number of modules at the end of the academic year is academically excluded, deregistered and 'pushed' out of the university despite his or her willingness to continue studying. The student is pushed out of the faculty and the university. In some of the South African elite institutions such as Ivory Tower University and Stellenbosch University, students are deregistered and forced out of their courses in the middle of the academic year.

With this background in mind and within the context of higher education transformation conversation currently going on in South Africa, I asked participants to reflect on the practice of 'pushing' working class students out of the university despite their willingness to continue with their studies.

Overall participants found the practice of pushing working class students out of universities despite their willingness to continue studying **unjustly punitive**, **contrary to the country's higher education transformation agenda** and **outright racist.**

Professor Benson at Bush University found universities' rigid academic exclusion policy unreasonably punitive towards working class students who arrive at university with very little

knowledge of the university's rules of the game and lack of career awareness. He argued that students should be allowed to switch their field of study until they find something, they are comfortable with and happy to pursue without being punished for it. Blame was apportioned to the universities' lack of curriculum flexibility that locks students into inflexible course structures and refuse them the opportunity to change their minds about their preferred field of study. Professor Benson particularly lamented the false expectation that students actually know what they want upon arrival at University.

> *"I'll give an example, at university I had, I knew someone who was actually studying psychology and ended up become a medical doctor… And then I know somebody who was doing engineering he didn't finish well in his last year he switched to business management and these are big guys today happy and really carrying other people behind them…"I keep on saying I don't think anyone is stupid, there's just something that we need to find that has gone wrong and get it fixed… my role actually is not to train the smart people"*
>
> (Prof Benson, Senior lecturer, Bush University)

Black institutions do not exclude you at all
(Martin, Senior Manager, NSFAS)

Martin, Senior Manager at NSFAS, found 'Pushed' dropout as a veil that masks elite universities' institutionalised race and class discrimination. As a senior manager and policy maker at NSFAS he felt the whole policy of pushing students out "*needs a review"* and that for him it remains a *"deliberate effort to exclude"* mainly black poor and working-class students from higher education. He identified universities' progression quotas in certain courses as evidence of predetermined intention to exclude certain groups of students. Elite institutions and specific faculties were singled out for practicing push dropout as a form of institutionalised discrimination hidden behind the charade of meritocracy:

> *Black institutions do not exclude you at all. In fact, they aid you towards excellence. Because for them having you as one of their throughput is more important than it is for the University of Cape Town…Immediately you define how many people must graduate on a subject, you've already shown your exclusion intent. So, the faculty in accounting is the worst in this treatment and the same applies to medicine*
>
> (Martin, Senior Manager, NSFAS)

Professor Ngoye highlighted that the exclusive use of grades as a basis of the decision to push students out of the university as *"one-sided*" as "*we don't look further to see where this person came from, what they had, what support they had. So, it's very kind of one sided and that obviously doesn't give you a complete picture of their ability or inability"*. He found the idea of pushing working class students out of the university "*immoral*" given students' unequal family and schooling experiences as well a university transition that is bias in favour of students who arrive with idealised cultural capital attributes:

> *…that's immoral. We don't do that here. That's why I did not even mention it… I did not even mention it because that's way out of our… Given the learners we recruit. We recruit learners who come from parents with very poor backgrounds and we cannot kick them out …*
>
> (Prof Ngoye, Head of Department, Merger University)

The overall rejection of universities' decisions to push students out on the basis of their academic performance was potently captured Dr Kigali at Ivory Tower University, who characterised the universities' practice of pushed dropout as irrational and unjustifiable *"symbolic violence that results in a real violence":*

> *MUKOVHE: Now, having said everything that we have said and having imagined the University and the dropout issue the manner in which we've imagined it in from the beginning of this conversation, when is it okay? Or is it ever okay? So, when is it okay to send somebody home regardless their intention to continue to study? It's an unavoidable question because of what happens in South Africa, particularly in your institution.*
>
> *Dr KIGALI: So, for me that presupposes certain things. It presupposes that this person is not teachable. That is the bottom line. And then the question becomes, who is not teachable? It presupposes that we have done everything that we can do as an institution to teach this person and when have we ever done that? So, fundamentally I would be opposed to this idea of exclusions because those two things are not evident, that a person is not teachable and that we have done everything that we can to teach… It's a real violence because ... It's a symbolic violence that results in a real violence because you've conferred an identity on this person; you are not teachable. I mean, conferring that identity you are sentencing them to something, to a life where they're not able then to meet the demands of the market society that we exist in.*

8.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, narrative accounts of university managers, policy makers, student leaders, academic and support staff at three different South African HEIs were explored for themes, with a particular focus on their lived experiences and perceptions of different HEIs' institutional role in working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education. In this chapter the focus of analysis moved away from the voice of working-class graduates and dropouts, to narrative accounts of key stakeholders in the South African higher education community in order to present a multidimensional picture of working-class completion and non-completion in higher education. The chapter is based on a thematic analysis the interviews I conducted with Heads of School, Registrars, Senior Lecturers, Student Leaders, Policy Makers, NSFAS Administrators/Managers and a Vice Chancellor at three historically and presently different learning contexts in South Africa: Bush University, Merger University and Ivory Tower University.

The following key themes emerged out of my interaction with participants' narrative accounts: First, an important theme to emerge from participants' narratives is that, despite its noble objectives, due to its policy and administrative deficiencies, the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is hindering more than it has enabling working-class students' odds of completion across HEIs. NSFAS was found to have not kept pace with growing working-class demand for higher education, so much so that it had become more of a curse than a blessing to its intended beneficiaries' odds of completion. Secondly, participants felt that different South African HEIs are alienating to working-class students in ways taken for granted. One senior university manager found HEIs, particularly elite institutions, untransformed, unkind and quite harsh on working-class students. Class, racial and gender-based discrimination was found to be feeding into the daily alienation of this working-class students in a manner that undermines their odd of success. Thirdly, participants widely held that, despite the widening participation and transformation policy commitments, South African universities remained unprepared for students from working class families and schooling backgrounds. The institutional culture at HEIs treats all students equally, resulting in unequal and very unjust transitions, experiences and outcomes. Fourthly, the three HEIs offer vastly differing learning contexts and that the hierarchy between institutions has been and continues to be reproduced and reinforced in ways that hinder working-class students' odds of success. Consequently, participants highlight that no real institutional transformation is taking place, elite institutions are practicing nothing more than "window dressing". And lastly, due to institutional policies and practices, working-class students are *pushed* more than they are *pulled* out of higher education.

The next chapter presents a concluding discussion and a synthesis of the thesis' major findings, empirical and theoretical contribution, limitations and potential areas of further inquiry.

CHAPTER 9: Concluding Discussion

9.1 Introduction

This study explored NSFAS funded working class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at three different South African universities. The purpose of the study was to gain insights from how working-class dropouts and graduates, as well as other key members of the university community, narrate their experiences of working-class completion and non-completion at different South African HEIs. From a host of qualitative methods, I adopted a narrative inquiry approach in order to obtain in-depth and rich insights, and to illuminate key dimensions of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education in manner that enables voices that are often unheard a space to be heard. This approach brought greater awareness to the collaborative nature of research between me, as the researcher, and the rest of the participants. Participants' narrative accounts were analysed through a combination of Bourdieu's theoretical constructs (field, capital and habitus) and a thematic approach to narrative analysis.

The empirical chapters (5, 6, 7, and 8) reconstructed a timeline of key dimensions of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education through the eyes of working-class graduates and dropouts, University Managers, Academic Staff, Support Staff, Student Leaders and Policy Makers. Specifically, the empirical chapters sought to address the research questions: How do working class graduates and dropouts, as well as key members of the South African higher education community, narrate their experiences of working-class completion and non-completion at different South African universities? How can their narrative accounts deepen our understanding of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education? Within the context of efforts to transform and widen participation in higher education, answers to these questions offered an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the challenge of student attrition in South African higher education, and also presented opportunities for transformation.

Based on detailed interview transcripts, the empirical chapters illuminated thematically reproductive and transformative dimensions of lived experiences that stood out from participants' narrative accounts at each of the three pre-determined phases of working-class students' journeys

to and through higher education: (1) Origins and Family Background, (2) Pathways En Route Higher Education and (3) their experiences of completion and non-completion at three South African HEIs. This enabled me to examine and illustrate how these phases are woven throughout the students' journeys to and through the different HEIs.

During analysis, the primary focus of the study was not so much on recurrent themes across interviews, but rather how participants' narrative accounts elucidate and illuminate the reproductive and transformative dimensions of NSFAS funded working-class students' experiences in higher education. Across participants' narratives, guided by the research questions, I selected narrative accounts in which participants' voice elucidate key dimensions of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion at different South African HEIs. I then analysed the life stories for thematic patterns and relationships between and within participants' narrative accounts, with particular attention given to narratives that diverge from established 'truths' about working class students' experiences and outcomes in higher education.

In this concluding discussion, I synthesize the empirical chapters in order to highlight my study's major findings and their contribution. I begin by drawing and summarising, from the empirical chapters, key themes and insights relating to working class students' origin and family background, pathways en route higher education and their higher education experience. I then consider these findings in light of Bourdieu's reproduction theory and the extent to which his theoretical framework aides an improved understanding of unequal patterns of achievement in higher education. Lastly, I present my study's limitations and potential areas of further inquiry

9.2 Summary of key findings, contribution and limitations

Working class students' narrative accounts of completion and non-completion in higher education spanned across three phases of their life stories: *origin and family background*, *their pathways en route higher education* and their *higher education experience and outcomes.* Chapters 5 and 6 presented in detail, key themes that emerged from my interaction with narratives of both working class graduates and dropouts. A number of themes and insights emerged out of each of the three overarching phases of their life stories, this section presents a summary of these findings.

9.2.1 Origin and family background

This phase focussed on key dimensions of working-class students' formative years with a particular focus on their communities of origin and family backgrounds. It sought to address the questions: where do these students come from? What can we learn about their communities of origin and family background? Who are the important people and institutions during this early phase of their educational journeys? What are the key events or moments (Highs, Lows and Turning Points) that shape their life stories? It is believed that attributes of student's communities of origin and family background (i.e. race, class, gender, language group, family income, geographic location, parents educational and occupational status) matters in our quest to deepen our understanding of patterns of educational experiences and attainment. This chapter, therefore, sought answers to the questions: where do these graduates come from? What can we learn about their communities of origin and family background? Who are the important people and institutions during this formative phase in their educational journeys? And what are the key events or moments (Highs, Lows and Turning Points} that helped shape their life and educational trajectories? (Reay, 1998; Yosso, 2005; Crisp and Nora, 2010; Crozier et al, 2011; Jury et al, 2017).

Participants' narrative accounts of their formative years revealed the following themes:

First, they come from rural and township communities. According to Statistics South Africa's 2017 Poverty Trends in South Africa report, the face of persistent poverty and social immobility in South Africa remains largely youth, African, female and of rural and township origin with little to no formal education. Low levels of household income make youth from these communities' eligible beneficiaries of the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). A *Johannesburg Poverty and Livelihoods Study* by De Wet and colleagues (2008) described Thabang's township of Alexandra as:

> "*characterised by high population density and growth rates, elevated levels of unemployment, an age profile skewed towards younger age categories, relatively low levels of education, and low monthly household incomes. The social situation resembles that of other urban townships in*

Gauteng. Social divisions remain strong, especially between 'old' and 'new' Alexandra residents, wrangling over limited space and opportunities."

The township of Thembisa, where Risuna lived whilst studying at Merger University, is no different from the above description. Overall, each participant's narrative account revealed both positive and negative dimensions their origin and family background. Although participants' narrative accounts are brought together by their similar working-class formative years, they were distinguished by the impact and meanings they each graduate attached to their lived experiences.

Participants' rural and township communities of origin and family background experiences are a microcosm of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past and presently unequal state of the nation. Due to its apartheid and colonial past, South Africa remains sharply segregated along class, gender, racial and spatial lines. Importantly, class and racial domination continue to resemble two sides of the same coin as the poor and working classes remain almost exclusively black, while the middle- and upper-class elite remain largely white. The consequences of this segregated and exploitative past continue to reproduce one of the most unequal societies in the world today (National Development Plan, 2011; Statistics South Africa,2017). On the receiving end of South Africa's deepening levels of inequality is people from two categories of origin: rural and township communities. It was therefore not surprising that all participating students where from rural and township communities, 25 years since the end of apartheid this is where the South African working-class still reside (Statistics South Africa,2017).

Secondly, graduates narrated having endured traumatic formative years and disrupted family circumstances. None of the graduates grew up with both parents. In all cases, their father was either absent or late. Rendani's father was alive but absent, she grew up under the care of her mother, grandmother and elder sister. Similarly, with his father absent, Lerato grew up in his grandparents' house. Ranzu's mineworker father passed away when she was a year old and Risuna's parents were divorced. Thabang experienced a particularly traumatic start to his life story, his mother was stabbed to death when he was one and a half years old. Consequently, both graduates and dropouts experienced weakened parental involvement during their formative years and schooling experiences. This finding affirms the work of Amanda Arbouin (2018) and what she to be the negative impact weakened parental involvement in the educational journeys of minority black British graduates. Consistent with what Arbouin (2018) found, the weakened parental involvement was not due to lack of trying on the part of participants' parents. Despite seeking to

see their children succeed, working parents in this study were not in a social, economic or cultural position to facilitate their children educational success. The parents' desire to disrupt the inter-generational transfer of disadvantage to their children was, however, not in question.

Thirdly, graduates' narratives illuminate the enabling role of community cultural wealth in working class students' educational journeys. Despite experiencing traumatic and disrupted formative years, participants' life stories shed light on the enabling and transformative role played by what Yosso (2005) referred to as community cultural wealth. Yosso (2005, p. 75) conceptualizes the working class as communities as endowed with community cultural wealth: "cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged". She advances that marginalized communities nurture cultural wealth through numerous forms of capital that enables its members, in this case working-class students, to navigate seemingly unbearable conditions. These forms of capitals include, but are not limited to, *aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital.*

Let's take the case of Thabang, the graduate from Ivory Tower University, to illustrate this point. With his father absent and mother deceased, Thabang's journey to completion was propelled by his grandmother and a retired teacher who ran an orphanage in his village, (whom he refers to as his mother). In this case, the intervention by his grandmother and the retired teacher who ran an orphanage matches what Yosso (2005) called *familial capital*, a form of cultural wealth that challenges traditional understandings of a 'family', in that it is cultivated by 'extended family' which includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, priests, traditional leaders to the whole community. It is from the same grandmother where Thabang acquires what Mills (2008) refers to as a *transformative habitus* that enables marginalized students to "recognize possibilities for improvisation" and approach their studies in ways that transform their conditions and improve their chances of success.

Similarly, Lerato, a graduate at Bush University, states early in his narrative that *"… where we stay and where we call home is my grandmother's house where my mother's parents stay. So, almost all of us; my uncles, my aunts, we all stay in one house".* Following disrupted formative years and family circumstances, participants' educational journeys were propelled by significant others such as grandparents, aunts, neighbours, orphanages, fellow congregants at church, etc.

Like the almost every participant in this study, Thabang was the first in his family to attend university. He says this is consistent with the low higher education participation rate in his

community where *"university students are so rare they are like something that comes out of a lucky packet … university for them (his family) , for me to go to any University was out of reality for my family".* As an orphaned high school learner, Thabang possessed the ability maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real barriers. According to Yosso (2005), at this stage Thabang already possessed *aspirational capital,* a form of cultural wealth that is nurtured in marginalised communities. Participants' life stories not only support the view of working-class communities endowed with community cultural wealth advanced by Yosso (2005), but further elucidate its transformative and enabling effect on their educational journeys.

Fourthly, graduates' backgrounds are similar but far from homogenous. While this study categorised participating students as working class on the basis of their family background, their narratives reveal that their backgrounds are similar but not homogenous. This is, therefore, an important distinction to make for higher education managers and policy makers. My study explored experiences of completion and non-completion within the category of working-class students and it is clear from students' narratives that some are more working class that others, so to speak. NSFAS's use of combined annual household income as the sole determinant for 'working class' eligibility may give the impression that we are dealing with a homogenous group of students. Graduates' narrative accounts put this assumption into question; NSFAS beneficiaries may not be a homogenous group of students and might not be treated as such.

The commonality is that all participants came from families with little to no income and with parents with little to no formal education at all. The difference, however, is that while others are children of mineworkers, farmworkers and domestic workers, others, like Thabang, are orphans and have had to literally scrape the bottom of the barrel in order to get by. While Rendani had a step brother to call when things seemed unbearable at Ivory Tower University, Ranzu , at Bush University, had no one to call.

> *So, where I stayed there was a ground. And what my gran did, she will dig the ground and then separate the soil from the rocks and then sell the rocks as concrete to the trucks. It was small stones. And then you pile them up and then sell it to the truck. And then another thing, you see these guys that are walking on the street with tins and cans and things like that? So, we will sit down, collect them and crush them put them inside bag and then sell those and recycle.* (Thabang, Graduate , Ivory Tower University)

9.2.2 Pathways En route higher education

Beyond their formative years, participants proceeded to narrate dimensions of their pathways en route higher education. I reconstructed this section of their narrative accounts into three categories of lived experiences: *schooling experiences*, *higher education aspirations* and the *higher education choice process.*

En route higher education, the following themes are notable in participants' narrative accounts:

e. Teachers as help navigate under-resourced schooling experiences

Firstly, all participating students attended public schools. Their narrative accounts on schooling experiences reveal realities characteristic of most public schools in South Africa: *under resourced, understaffed, crowded classrooms with inadequate infrastructure and mainly located in rural and township communities.* Although growing, the higher education participation remains "very low", participants said. All of them enrolled in higher education institutions immediately after completing their grade 12 which is the final year of secondary schooling in South Africa.

Secondly, participants were top achievers at under-resourced schools. Rendani was ranked second in maths and science stream, earning several top achievers' certificates at school. Thabang excelled so much that he "was one of the kids in class that was very loved by teachers". Ranzu excelled so much at school that she was made to skip grade 9. It is this early academic achievement that enabled them to make universities' steep and ever-rising university admission requirements.

Almost all participants identified resourceful and improvising teachers that went beyond the call of duty to help them navigate under-resourced schooling experiences. Where they encountered difficulties at school, graduates recalled *a one or two teachers* they credit for motivating them, having high expectations of them and fuelling their aspirations. After outlining her family background, Ranzu proudly declared that "*I was the bright student at school, so I always came out number one and then I had teachers who always encouraged me*". Risuna's schooling experience was however divergent from the rest. He recalled experiences of discouraging negative stereotyping and low expectations from some of his teachers. Although he turned his grades around, he identified this experience as one of the early nadir moments in his educational journey.

Thirdly, all, but Lerato, are first in family to go to university. Of all participants, Lerato's schooling experiences suggest possession of cultural capital in the 'right' currency. All his grandparents were college graduates who worked as school principals in the village. His mother, although unemployed, is a university graduate. As a university graduate, his mother was empowered to make well considered choices about her child's schooling experiences. For example, while most parents sent participants to public schools located nearest to their village or township, Lerato's mother insisted "…*no my children have to go to a place where the education is in another level compared to the village that we come from."* Lerato later found out that his mother's attention to detail informed the school choice. *"…when I asked my mum, "Why this secondary school?"* She said, *"Because when you were young you used to draw a lot."* The school not only offered a diverse range of subjects but was also *"one of the top preforming schools around the region"*. Lerato's mother's direct and indirect involvement in his educational journey offers an alternative lens to the dominant deficit understanding on working class parents and their children's schooling experiences.

f. Road to Higher Education Paved with Stepping Stones And Agents of Transformation

Despite the evident disparities in their levels of higher education awareness and aspirations, participants made it to university on the back of stepping stones, agents of transformation and serendipities (Arbouin, 2018). A career guidance instructor at an exhibition paved Risuna's path to Merger University and a motivational teacher helped push Ranzu's path to higher education. A retired teacher who runs an orphanage, his grandmother and a caring admissions officer were Thabang's stepping stones en route Ivory Tower University.

Thabang's grandmother, Mrs Sue from the orphanage and the Student Enrolment Officer at Ivory Tower University are key stepping stones that paved Thabang's path to higher education and in many ways his life story. Their role in Thabang's aspirations and transition to higher education fits the profile of people Mills (2008) refers to as "agents of transformation" who "can draw upon a variety of cultural capitals" to disrupt the reproductive cycle in working class students' journey to and through higher education.

Thabang's narration of the influence and role played by these key characters in his journey to Ivory Tower University shines light on the transformative potential of working-class people's

"community cultural wealth" and specifically the transformative role of aspirational and familial capital (Yosso, 2005) found in working class communities. Equally important, Thabang's narration of Mrs. Sue's enduring belief in him and how the orphanage environment she provided , "in itself" was "why I was able to then nurture me into the person I've become", sheds important light on the shaping, evolution and transformation of his habitus en route higher education (Crozier and Reay, 2011). According to Bourdieu:

> *The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms* (Bourdieu, 1990: 54)

g. Varied degrees of higher education awareness and aspirations

With regard to higher education aspirations, participants' experiences are varied. On the one end of the spectrum we have Lerato, for whom going to university was considered a natural post schooling destination. He identified three key features of his origins and family background that propelled his higher education aspirations: *being born to a family of college and university graduates,* his *desire to uplift his family from poverty*, and the *influential role of the church*. His grandparents particularly made it clear "*that there is no way we are going to have a family member who is not educated and who will not go to university"* and for as long as he can remember Lerato *"always knew that at some point I will have to go to university"*. This belief was cemented when his older sister qualified to enrol for an extended Bachelor of Commerce degree at Bush University. Lerato's desire to lift the poverty "weight out of my mother's shoulders' as one of the key motivations behind his pursuit for academic excellence at school in order to qualify to go to university.

On the other hand of the spectrum we have Thabang for whom higher education was not within the realm of reality. He was first in a family for whom the idea of him going to university was unreal. As he put it: *"University for them (his family), me to go to any University was out of reality for my family".* Markedly, Thabang states that the notion of going to university being a distant reality is consistent with the very low higher education participation rate in his community where *"university students are so rare they are like something that comes out of a lucky packet"*. He grew up with two sisters, none of whom went to university.

h. The illusion of 'choice' in higher education

Participants' higher education choice process fell within two broad categories: choice of field of study and choice of university.

- **A few made it into their preferred field of study**

With regard to their choice of study: a few of them made it into their "first choice". Their higher education choice process was undermined by lack of career awareness and universities ever-hiking their admission requirements. Although Rendani enrolled for a BSc in Geography and Geology, she confessed that upon enrollment she *"didn't know what geology was"*. Her *"successful"* brother who recommended Ivory Tower University also supported Geology, which happened to be what he studied … *"He (step brother) is doing geology and there is a lot of money"*. Ranzu "always wanted to be a scientist when still at primary", unfortunately she failed to meet the admission requirements for her first choice (BSc in Plant Pathology) and had to settle for her second choice (Environmental Sciences). Similarly, with regard to his *choice of field of study,* Thabang initially "wanted to study Architecture but the marks (grades) didn't allow me". Having failed to meet Architecture's admission requirements and settled for his second choice which was a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology.

In contrast, due to early career awareness, Risuna and Lerato made it into their field of study. Lerato's choice of Urban and Regional Planning as a career of choice was thought out. He took into consideration his "passion" for "technical drawing", his "strengths", alignment with the subjects he was good at in high school and consideration for "scarce skills in our country". He appeared particularly informed about his career prospects and options. He specifically went for a degree that majored in subjects he was good at in high school and avoided degrees that majored in maths and science. Similarly, Risuna experienced early career awareness and was always clear about his chosen career path. He tells me that Mechanical Engineering was his only choice and he credited this to watching his father fix his own car from which grew his love for *"fixing things"*.

- **"*Bush University was not my first choice":* 'Choice' of Institution**

With regard to participants' choice of institution, the following dimensions are apparent: first, for virtually every one of them Bush University, a historically black only, grossly under resourced and rural based institution, was not their 'first choice'. It was what they fell back to when rejected by Ivory Tower Institutions for failing to meet the financial or academic admission requirements. Ranzu had the comprehensive Merger University as her first choice, the elite Pretoria University as her second choice and Bush University as her third choice. Ranzu narrated that "*I wasn't planning to come to Bush University. My dream was to go to Merger University or University of Pretoria. Merger University I couldn't qualify due to my lower marks in maths and physics."* Similarly, when choosing the institution, Lerato chose Bush university because he felt it was "*the only option*" for him.

Overall, participants' institutional destination was underpinned more by considerations and not so much the institution itself. These considerations included for geographic location of the university and its proximity to family in the case of Thabang, failure to meet the academic and financial requirements of preferred institution in the case of Ranzu. Risuna's choice of Merger University was influenced by an alumnus of the very university during a career exhibition event while he was still in secondary school. He explains:

> *Okay, like i remember this guy I met at home, he was working at Ford, so he did mechanical engineering … and during those career exhibitions and stuff … I went and asked him what did you do? Mechanical? And he said he did it at Merger University. That was it…I decided I will also try Merger University.*
> *(Risuna, Graduate, Merger University)*

Lerato ended up at Bush University out of financial considerations. Tuition fee at Bush University is relatively affordable when compared to other HEIs. Additionally, the university's rural location meant the cost of living is lower which makes it easier for students to commute daily from home and avoid the cost of student housing. He explained:

> *LERATO … in terms of choice of choosing a university that I have to go to, it was also limited because of the background that I come from. So, the only option for university was Bush University because of my financial background and my mother's employment status.*

Overall, there is clear evidence of social class reproduction in students' higher education choice process. Its influence is ever present to an extent of rendering the existence of choice an illusion. Due to participants' class position (i.e. where they are born, who they are born to, their community's higher education awareness and participation rate, the presence or absence of role models), some options are simply not available to this group of students. So, although the university application form gives them a first, second and even third choice, the inaccessibility of some options makes the existence of choice to participants questionable.

9.2.3 Reproductive and Transformative dimensions of participants' higher education experiences and outcomes

This section synthesizes participants' narrative accounts across the three universities. Key themes are categorised into negative (hindering) and positive (enabling) dimensions of their experience in higher education institutions. The objective is by no means to achieve generalizability of experience, but rather to highlight key dimensions or themes that, for me as the researcher, stand out from how participants narrated their journeys to completion. Given the volume of interview data, and to maintain novelty, I had to restrict myself to the key issues that aligned the most to the research question.

a. Reproductive dimensions of participants' higher education experience

The first category of themes highlights the negative or reproductive dimensions of participants' experience in higher education. In this category of themes, graduates' life stories reveal patterns of hinderances collectively experienced. Negative dimensions of participants' higher education experience included: *experiencing a turbulent transition and hard landings on arrival in higher education*; *homelessness and housing challenges*; *distrust and toxic student-faculty relations*; *a poorly administered and mismanaged financial aid programme and alienating institutional practices.*

The turbulent transitions and housing challenges both have a poorly administered and mismanaged NSFAS financial aid as a common cause. NSFAS' Financial aid *moderates*, it does not *eliminate* the hindering and seemingly indelible stain of being a working-class student in South African higher education. Participants' experiences in this study have shown that the burden of being of working-

class origin follows this group of students from their villages and township into the university halls and hallways. Specifically, graduates, dropouts and university managers alike felt that the poor administration and overall inadequacy of NSFAS has weakened instead of strengthening working-class students' ability to negotiate and persist in higher education. The inadequacy of NSFAS led to experiences of homelessness, food insecurity and general feelings of uncertainty, all of which are incompatible with the odds of successful completion. Notably, for some participants , had been more of a curse than a blessing.

With regard to alienating institutional contexts, working-class students felt shy, unwelcomed, "completely overwhelmed" and "out of place" in higher education, particularly at country's highly selective and elite institutions such as Ivory Tower University. The fourth important finding has to with the a clearly disproportionate weight of being working class in higher education between male and female students, with female students bearing the worst brunt. This finding particularly support Jacobs (1996) call for adequate attention to gender inequality within higher education and her caution against the tendency of scholars to sweep gender inequality under the carpet of racial and class inequality.

HEIs were found to be alienating to working-class students in ways taken for granted. Elite institutions in particular are perceived to be untransformed, unkind and quite harsh on working-class students. Class, racial and gender-based discrimination was found to be feeding into the daily alienation of this working-class students in a manner that undermines their odd of success. Participants widely held that, despite the widening participation and transformation policy commitments, South African universities remained unprepared for students from working class families and schooling backgrounds. The institutional culture of treating all unequal students equally has resulted in unequal and very unjust transitions, experiences and outcomes. Thirdly, the three HEIs offer vastly differing learning contexts and that the hierarchy between institutions has been and continues to be reproduced and reinforced in ways that hinder working-class students' odds of success. Participants' narratives stressed that no real institutional transformation is taking place. And lastly, due to HEIs' financial and academic progression policies and practices, working-class students are *pushed* more than they are *pulled* out of higher education.

b. Transformative dimensions of participants' higher education experience

Despite evident hinderances experienced in their journeys to and through higher education, narrative accounts of the five graduates reveal enabling and transformative dimensions of their experiences at different higher education institutions: First, *they do not arrive empty handed, they bring durable community cultural wealth to higher education* ; second, *their possession and development of a transformative habitus (Mills, 2008) and wealth of aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) propels them over the finish line*; third, *agents of transformation (Mills, 2008) facilitate the accumulation of idealised forms of capital which in turn multiplies their chances of success* (Maurice et al, 2017); fourth, *beyond 1st Year, their journey to completion is a relatively "smooth" one*; and fifth, *in the case of Lerato at Bush university, we notice a rarely positive and successful effect of juggling work and university.*

In contrast to the largely deficit view of working-class students in higher education as a risky investment, drawing from experiences of working-class graduates, narratives accounts in this study invite the research spotlight to the cultural capital wealth and dispositions that underwrite the transformative potential of this group of students in higher education. Consistent with Arbouin (2018), Yosso (2005, p. 69) and others , narrative accounts in this study strongly suggest that we move away from the notion of working-class students "as full of cultural poverty disadvantages" and pay more attention to the often-overlooked cultural wealth of abilities, skills and social networks found in people from marginalised communities and households. An important finding to emerge in this regard is that, despite all that they lack, working-class students do not enter the field of higher education empty handed. Both dropouts and graduates in this study drew from a variety of often overlooked resources and dispositions to aspire, navigate and persist in higher education. Participants in this study drew from their lived experiences to illustrate how working-class students bring a valuable portfolio of capital and dispositions acquired from their working-class homes, communities, schooling experiences and pathways en route higher education. It is this wealth of capital and dispositions that the unlikely working-class graduates drew from in order to succeed in higher education.

Secondly, participants drew from a variety of often overlooked resources and dispositions to aspire, navigate and persist in higher education. Both graduates and dropouts *accumulated and convert/translate* their largely disregarded wealth of working-class community cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) into idealised or rewarded forms of capital, they accumulate additional forms of capital when institutional conditions are allowing (Crozier and Diane Reay, 2011) and endure in a manner that

multiples (Crul et al, 2017) their chances of successful completion in an often hostile and violent field of higher education. Thirdly, forced to adult young, the decisions that both graduates and dropouts took under difficult conditions point to the presence of an *enduring, adaptive and transformative habitus* (Mills, 2008). As seen in Thabang and Linda's stories, for them giving up is not an option. While they are hindered by being a "fish out of water" and their lack of familiarity with both written and unwritten rules of the higher education game, for some, a rare encounter with an *agent of transformation* (Mills, 2008) seems enough to get them over the finish line.

Working-class students' narratives in this study support the literature on the transformative potential of non-traditional students in higher education, particularly as advanced by Yosso (2005) (community cultural wealth) , Mills (2008) (transformative habitus and agents of transformation) , Crozier and Reay (2011) (capital accumulation) , Arbouin (2018) and others. The diagram below summarizes how these concepts illuminate the transformative potential of working-class students in higher education.

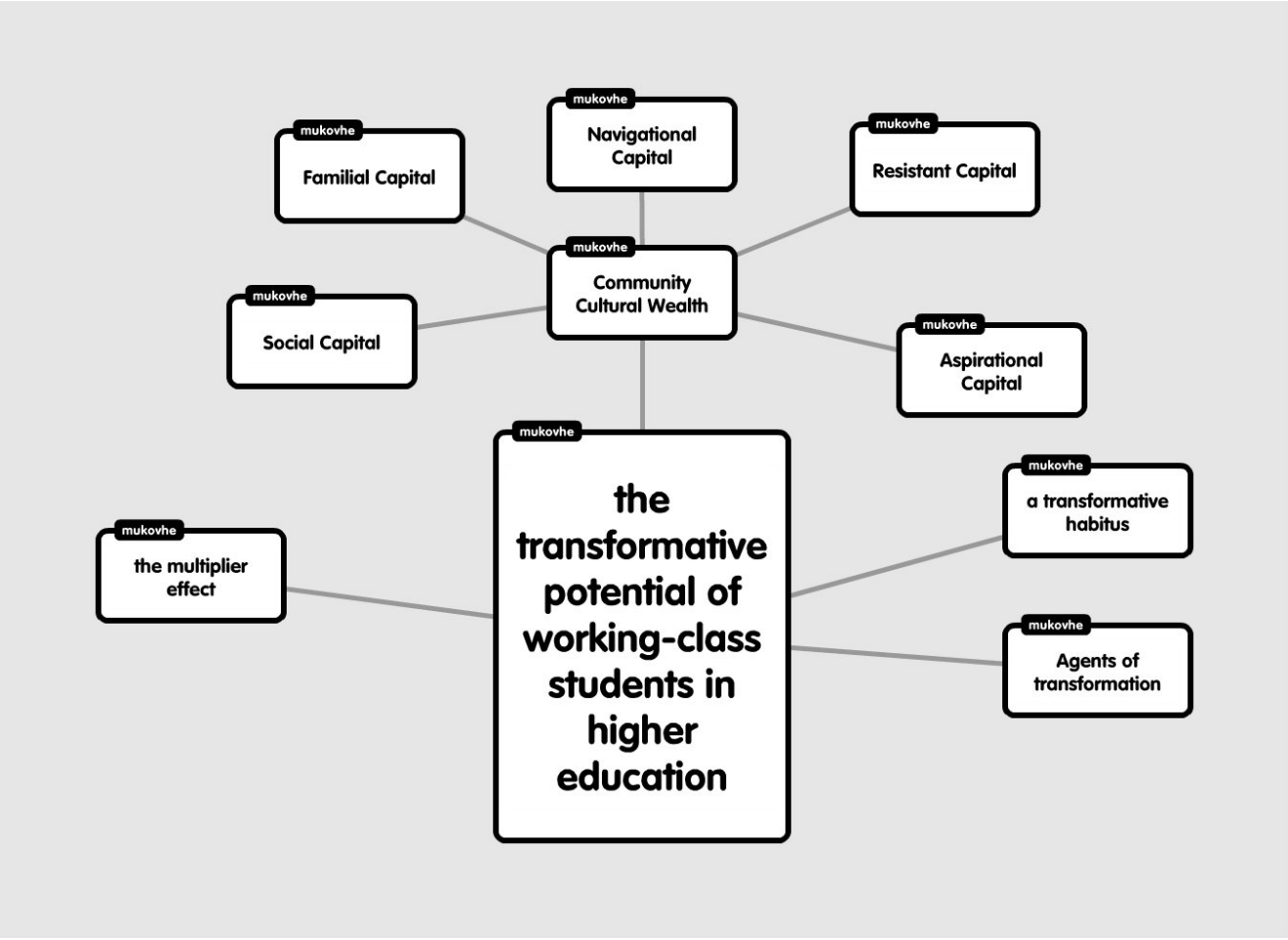

Figure 1: A model of dimensions of the transformative potential of working-class students in higher education

9.3 Conclusion

This thesis shines the research spotlight on the prevalence of high non-completion and low completion rates amongst working-class students as an ever-present dimension of persistent inequality in higher education and one that undermines the very idea of higher education as a vehicle to achieve more equitable and socially just societies. With working-class students having largely been theorized through reproductive and deficit lens, the focus has disproportionately gone to understanding what they lack and how to help them fit or assimilate into higher education, with little regard for what they bring and offer to widening-participation efforts. As a result, not enough attention is paid to the voice from the working-class margins, and the value it offers to efforts that seek to deepen our understanding of the challenge of high dropout rates and low completion rates in higher education. To address this gap, I examined narrative accounts of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in public South African universities, and how insights from these experiences offer opportunities to deepen and enrich on-going efforts to transform and widen participation in South African higher education and elsewhere in the world. Importantly, my study illuminates the often overlooked resourceful and transformative side of working-class students, in their journeys to and through higher education. Empirically, I reconstruct and illuminate a timeline of reproductive and transformative dimensions of working-class students' origins, their pathways en route higher education and higher education experiences, and how these phases are woven in ways that hinder and/or enable success in higher education. My study suggests that theorizing working-class students as inherently deficient presents potential pitfalls for Bourdieu's reproduction theory in ways that miss opportunities for transformation. This study showed the reproductive side of working-class experiences in higher education whilst illuminating ample areas of transformative potential.

An important limitation of this study needs to be acknowledged: given the sheer volume and richness of the data collected, the analysis section of this study could have benefitted from more time. My study joins this on-going conversation on inequality of educational attainment in higher education, insights generated here will contribute towards future research work in this field of inquiry. Student housing and homelessness, food insecurity and student-faculty relations are areas that deserve further inquiry. I hope the detailed insights into working-class students' attrition can contribute towards the work of university managers, administrators, higher education practitioners and policy makers in aiding an improved understanding of working-class students' experiences of completion and non-completion in higher education.

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Appendices:

Appendix A: Participant Information Letter and invitation to participate in study

Good Day
My name is Mukovhe Masutha, I am currently undertaking a PhD research study at the University of Bath, School of Management's International Centre for Higher Education Management. My study's main focus is in investigating factors potentially contribution to the high dropout rates and low completion rates of undergraduate students funded through the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) at different South African Universities.
The study is being carried out through qualitative narrative and in-depth unstructured interviews with students and higher education stakeholders across the sector to solicit their experience and perspective of the high non-completion/dropout and low graduation challenge facing South African higher education. The interview will last approximately one hour and will be conducted by myself in person or via Skype/Telephone call.
I kindly invite you to participate in the study because you meet the criteria of being a university manager, faculty member , administrator or support staff with an experience of working with poor and working class students in your respective occupation. With your permission, interviews will be tape recorded in order to ensure accurate transcription of the interview.
Should you agree to participate, your participation is voluntary, and you will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way for choosing to participate or not participate in the study. All of your responses will be kept confidential, and no information that could identify you would be included in the research report. Some of the responses that you provide in the interview will be quoted directly or indirectly in the final written report whereby an anonymous labelling process will be used to refer to your identity and responses.
The interview material (tapes) will not be seen or heard by any person in this organisation at any time except by myself. In the interests of transparency, your interview transcript will be made available to you for your perusal. Any information that you may/not be comfortable with for inclusion in the final report may be amended in this stage.
The interview schedule contains questions that will inquire about your role at the university, your understanding and perspective of the high non-completion/dropout rate of poor and working class students (NSFAS students) , factors potentially behind the challenge and how you believe the challenge could be tackled.
You may refuse to answer any questions you would prefer not to, and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any point (the data collected at this point will in this regard be discarded and not included for analysis). If you choose to participate in the study please contact me or alternatively leave me a message, and I will contact you within a day or so in order to

discuss your participation. My contact details are 0791898717 or via e-mail at m.masutha@bath.ac.uk.
Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in the study.
Yours Sincerely
Mukovhe Morris Masutha (Researcher)
Supervisors: Prof Rajani Naidoo (R.naidoo@bath.ac.uk) and Prof Jurgen Enders (j.enders@bath.ac.uk)
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Appendix B: Interview Guide: Participant: Working Class Graduates and Dropouts

Participant: NSFAS Students who dropped out of University
THE LIFE STORY INTEVIEW GUIDE: GRADUATE
OPENING
a. Establishing Rapport
Mukovhe: Good Morning. My name is Mukovhe Masutha and I am a PhD at the University of Bath. I am currently undertaking a PhD research study in the School of Management's International Centre for Higher Education Management.
Thank you very much for agreeing to be part of this research project, I am deeply grateful for your time and effort.

As you already know you have been invited to participate in the study because you meet the criteria of being an NSFAS-funded student who has either successfully completed his/her undergraduate studies or dropped out before completing his or her undergraduate studies . Based on this, I welcome your participation in this study. With your permission, interviews will be tape recorded to ensure accurate transcription of the interview.
b. Introduction and Purpose of Interview
Mukovhe: In light of the prevalence of high dropout rates and low graduation rates amongst students funded through the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) at different South African Universities, my study aims to investigate and gain an improved understanding of factors potentially contribution to the high dropout rates and low completion rates of this category of students by listening to life stories of both NSFAS graduates and those who have dropped out, as well as the perspective of university managers , policy makers ,student leaders academic and support staff.
Mukovhe: This is an interview about the story of your life. I'll mainly seat back and allow you to kindly narrate your story from your early life, family background, the type of community you come from, dreams and wishes you had growing up, your schooling experience, your journey and transitioning to university , your actual experience as an NSFAS-Funded university student and how this whole life story result to where you are today.
c. Motivation
Mukovhe: Apart from the academic reasons behind my study, I hope to tell your story in a manner that contributes to an improved and enriched understanding of factors potentially contributing to the high dropout rates and low graduation rates of financial aid funded students in South Africa.
d. **Timeline**
Mukovhe: As stated on the consent form, the interview is likely to take about hour and thirty minutes (1 hr :30 Mins) of your time.
{NB: After the opening, I will then transition the interviewee into the second stage of the interview which is the body of the interview}
BODY: MAIN NARRATION PHASE
2.1 Demographic Profiling and a General Outline of Life Story

- **AIM**: The aim of this section of the life story interview is to achieve the following:

  - Solicit a general outline of the student's life story from early life to present moment.
  - Profile and map out the students' portfolio and volume of capitals (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) during their early life in general and their pre-university phase in particular.
  - Explore the student's habitus (disposition towards and during different phases of his/her life in general and education in particular)

- **MUKOVHE**: *Thank you for completing the biographical information form I emailed you* (The biographical form maps out the participant's profile and is sent to the student to complete before the interview in order to make more time for the interview. Also to avoid omitting critical aspects of the participant's biographical profile)

- ***MUKOVHE***: To start, I would like you to think about your life as a story that begins when you are born until the moment you left the university without completing your studies. I would like to know your story and the journey you have travelled. Your personal and educational journey from your Family, Community, Schooling and University experience until the moment you left university. What happened?

{Researcher's Note: The interviewer will allow for 20-25 minutes (McAdams, 1995) for the participant to narrate his/her pre-university experience and general outline of his life story without interrupting. I will reduce myself to active listening and non-verbal feedback such as nodding to encourage a detailed narration. Importantly, while listening I will be jotting down key moments and events for further prompting and probing once the participant is done narrating. Once the participant is done, I will gently if he or she would like to add anything before gently transitioning to the next section of the interview. I may ask for elaborations and clarifications once the respondent is done narrating} (McAdams, 1995). **{e.g. This is really interesting, Could you tell me more about this….}**

2.2 Critical events in Life Story: Pre-University Phase, Transitioning Phase, University Phase

{**AIM**: to explore how events or experiences during different phases have shaped student's educational journey from early life to present day}

MUKOVHE: I would now like focus on critical events in your life story **(i.e. Peak/Positive Moments; Negative/Low Points and Turning Points)** that remain memorable to you during different key phases/chapters **(i.e. Pre-University Phase, Transitioning Phase, University Phase)** of your life story.

PRE-UNIVERSITY PHASE:

A. PEAK/POSITIVE MOMENTS

A peak moment represents an event (s) or experience (s) that **contributed positively** towards your educational journey during this pre-university

MUKOVHE: What would you say were your PEAK MOMENTS/EXPERIENCES during your **Pre-University Phase?**

- *Can you think of a **POSITIVE memory**, event or story during this phase of your life story that **POSITIVELY** shaped your educational journey to where you are today? Can you tell me more about what was happening at the time?*
- *Which people or organisations were most involved or instrumental at this phase of your journey? What kind of role did they play?*

B. LOW POINT/NEGATIVE MOMENTS

MUKOVHE: What would you say were your LOW MOMENTS/EXPERIENCES during the **Pre-University Phase?**

- What challenges did you face growing up and which of these stand out to you as the most memorable?
- *Can you think of a **NEGATIVE memory**, event or story during this phase of your life story that NEGATIVELY shaped your educational journey to where you are today? Can you tell me more about what was happening at the time?*
- *Which people or organisations were involved or instrumental? What role did they play?*
- What was your attitude towards all of this?

C. TURNING POINT

Looking back at this chapter of your life what would you say was your turning point? Something that happened and you feel this is when this is when things changed for the "best' or "worst".

Researcher's Note:

The researcher will not interrupt the description of the events. I will rather prompt for elaborations or clarification after the participant has finished the initial description of the events. At this stage, only where necessary, ***prompting will pursue details around*** *:*

- ***Prompts about Family***: *Tell me about the influence of type, size and role of family where you comes from? The role and impact of parents and siblings or even extended family and their attitude or role towards the your schooling and life in general? Tell me about your* ***feelings and reactions/response*** *to this influence/experience?.* {*Information about parents and family members' occupational and educational status would have been acquired when the student completed the* ***Biographical Profile Form*** *completed before the interview*}.

- ***Prompts about Community***: Is it common for youth in your community to go to university? *The influence of the community (village or town) on student's educational journey and life story in general.* **How did you feel or react to this experience** {*Note: Establishing student's early disposition/habitus*}.

- ***Prompts about Schooling***: *How was your secondary school experience? Why did you chose that school? How far did you have to travel? Did you all have the study materials (e.g. books, libraries, science and computer labs) you needed? The type of subjects you took at school? did you have good teachers? What was a the medium of instruction? Subjects pursued in high school?, the friends, the kind of support the student had or didn't have, role of organisations such as religious or sporting organisations.*

  - ***{Sub-Note: Here the researcher is establishing student's early portfolio of different dimensions of capitals and his/her disposition/habitus}.***

TRANSITIONING TO UNIVERSITY

{**AIM**: to explore how events or experiences during the transition to university phase has shaped student's life story and journey to higher education}

MUKOVHE: Tell me more about how you found yourself at this university? How did it all come about?

- **Prompts**:
  - Why this university? why this field of study? Did you know anyone at this university?
  - Did you always know you were going to University growing up? Who do you believe mainly influenced your decisions at this stage? Which organisations or institutions where involved?

MUKOVHE: What challenges did you face at this transitional stage of your educational journey? What was attitude towards challenges you confronted at this stage? Did you seek or receive help from anywhere? Tell me more about how that occurred?

Researcher Note:

The researcher will not interrupt the participant's narration of the events around transitioning to higher education. I will rather prompt for elaborations or clarification after the participant has finished the initial description of the events. At this stage, only where necessary, prompting will pursue details around they type of capitals the student possessed or lacked (e.g. Social Capital) in the process of transitioning to higher education, student's disposition towards going to university and the role played by the field of university in the student's transition from high school to university.

- *Prompts: Is it common for youth in your community to go to university? Which universities were popular amongst your friends and in your community? how did you find out about this university? Did you have options or was this the only university you could come to? Did the university reach out to you in any way? Why this degree/diploma? How did you find out about this field of study? Did you know anyone in your family or community who studied at this university or this field of study? How far is your home from this university?*

BEING AT UNIVERSITY: THE INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIENCE

{AIM: to explore how institutional experience shaped student's life story in relation to completion or non-completion in higher education and how the student responded}
MUKOVHE: Take me through your experience at this university from the moment you walked through the gates of the university, how did it all unfold? Wat was going through your mind at the time? What were your first impressions upon arrival?
o Prompt: *Can you think of a memory, event or story that best captures your earliest experience/ moments on campus? Can you tell me more about what was happening at the time?*
A. PEAK/POSITIVE MOMENTS
A peak moment represents an event (s) or experience (s) that **<u>contributed positively</u>** towards your educational journey during this pre-university
<u>MUKOVHE</u>: What would you say were your PEAK MOMENTS/EXPERIENCES during your **Pre-University Phase?**
▪ *Can you think of a **POSITIVE memory**, event or story during this phase of your life story that **POSITIVELY** shaped your educational journey to where you are today? Can you tell me more about what was happening at the time?*
▪ *Which people or organisations were most involved or instrumental at this phase of your journey? What kind of role did they play?*
B. LOW POINT/NEGATIVE MOMENTS
<u>MUKOVHE</u>: What would you say were your LOW MOMENTS/EXPERIENCES during the **Pre-University Phase?**
▪ What challenges did you face growing up and which of these stand out to you as the most memorable?
▪ *Can you think of a **NEGATIVE memory**, event or story during this phase of your life story that NEGATIVELY shaped your educational journey to where you are today? Can you tell me more about what was happening at the time?*
▪ *Which people or organisations were involved or instrumental? What role did they play?*
▪ What was your attitude towards all of this?

C. TURNING POINT
Looking back at this chapter of your life what would you say was your turning point? Something that happened and you feel this is when this is when things changed for the "best' or "worst".
D. STORIES AND THE LIFE STORY
MUKOVHE: What motivated/demotivated you the most during your educational journey to or at university?
FACTORS BEHIND COMPLETION OR NON-COMPLETION?
MUKOVHE: What abilities/qualities do you attribute to your success the most? Did you come with them? If not where and how did you acquire them?
MUKOVHE: From your life experience as an undergraduate student, what factors do you attribute the most to the high dropout rate at university. Why are so many NSFAS students dropping out of university?
MUKOVHE: Do you know any NSFAS student who dropped out of university? What happened?
MUKOVHE: In your experience, what do you feel NSFAS/working class students struggle with the most at university?
MUKOVHE: How do you feel the high dropout rate of working class students in universities can be reduced? Who should play what role?
MUKOVHE: What are the things you know now that you wish you knew before you enrolled at the university?
MUKOVHE: Inside the classroom, what did you struggle with the most?
FUNDING: BEING A FINANCIAL AID STUDENT (NSFAS)
MUKOVHE: Kindly share with me your experience as a National Students Financial Aid Scheme funded student?

PROMPTS:
o How did you find out about the National Students Financial Aid scheme (NSFAS)?
o Did your financial aid package consistently cover all your expenses as a student ?
o Did you face any challenges as NSFAS student? Could you elaborate?
o Did you ever work part time alongside your studies in order to compensate for financial aid shortage?
OTHER
o What else would you like me to know in order to understand your life story?
o What are your future plans moving forward?
Thank you very much for your time.
END

Appendix C: Interview Guide: Participant: Managers/Staff/Policymakers

<u>Interview Guide :</u> **<u>Participant: Managers/Staff/Policymakers</u>**
1. Could you kindly give me a brief overview of the roles you have played in South African Higher Education including your current role.
{Researchers Note: this question is aimed at providing a comfortable, familiar and nonthreatening way into the interview, whilst establishing a relationship with the participant.

Additionally, it helps me locate the person in the organisation from his/her own perspective and gain a sense of their role within higher education} (Dr Leslie Curry et al, 2013 and Britten, 1995)
2. In what ways have you been involved with poor and working class students including working class/NSFAS funded students?
3. What has been some of your most memorable experiences/moments in working with this category of students? Can you think of examples of events or students that best capture your experience?
4. What kind of a university does this institution offer to students who walk through your gates? What is it that attract students to this institution and what is it that scares them away?
5. In what ways does this intuition widen participation in higher education to non-traditional students, particularly NSFAS/working class students? {In what ways does Univen cater to accommodate poor and working class students?
6.What sort of challenges do students do students face at this institution? What do some of them do to cope with such challenges?
7. In your experience, what qualities or abilities do you feel this group of students **lack** when they arrive at university which in turn hinders their ability to complete their studies?
o Given your experience in higher education can you think of cases of such students in this regard?
8. Now, apart from the challenges/deficiencies that you have identified, **what abilities or competencies have you found that this group of students bring along** to University that **positively** shape their higher education experience?

9. NSFAS/poor and working class students have a very high dropout rate and low completion rate. In your experience, what have **you found to be specific factors** potentially contributing to the high dropout rates and low graduation rates? Can you think of **cases/student stories** where such factors have manifested on this or any other institutions?
10. Have there been efforts to reduce the high dropout rates and improve the completion rates of working class students at this institution? What has been the experience?
11. Some students **get pulled**, while others **get pushed out** of the university, what is your perspective on **involuntary academic exclusion of working class students** from universities? **When is it okay to send the student home**, despite his or her willingness to continue studying?
12. What kind of relationship does the university have with students who have dropped out? Is there any chance for the student to be allowed back? Does the university have any programme aimed at getting these students back to higher education?
13. The Fees Must Fall protests raised a lot of issues around the administration of NSFAS, what has been your experience with the overall **policy development and administration** of NSFAS Grants/loans.
14. The experience students tend to differ from one university to another, in your experience, how is your institutional culture here **hindering or enabling** working class students' chances to successfully complete their Undergraduate Studies.
15. Should poor and working-class students **fit into** the Universities' institutional culture and environment or should universities adjust to accommodate them?
17. Nationally, what do you believe should be done to curb the high dropout rates of NSFAS funded students?

- Prompt: Can you think of events or stories where such interventions have yielded good results?
18. The transformation of higher education has been a policy priority of the democratic government. From your perspective, in what ways should South African Higher Education be transforming and are we on the right track?
19. Would you like add anything from your experience to this subject matter?

Appendix D: Consent Form for participation and audio recording

Consent Form for participation and audio recording

I hereby consent to participate in this research project. The purpose and the procedures of the study have been explained to me. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to comment on particular issues, without negative consequences.

I understand that my responses will be kept completely confidential and that I may decide what aspects of my transcript data may be made public. I understand that my name will not be used and that I will not be linked to any specific responses in the research report without my permission.

Name of participant: _____
Date: _____
Signature: _____

I have explained the purpose and procedures of the study as well as the rights of the participant. I agree with the conditions in the participants' information sheet and consent form and undertake to adhere to them.

Name of Researcher: _____
Date: _____
Signature : _____

Appendix E : Students biographical information Sheet

Name Surname:	
Age	
Gender	
University:	**University of**
Field of Study:	
Year of Study	
Family Back ground:	
Type of Community (Village/township/farm)	
Community's HE Participation Rate?	
Did you grow up with both parents?	
Parents Educational Status	
Parents Occupational Status	
Main source of household income during your undergraduate Studies	
Educational and occupational status of close relatives (e.g. Aunt, Uncle, Grandfather/Mother)	
Number of Siblings and their educational status	
Siblings employment status	
Educational Background:	
Type of Primary and Secondary attended (e.g. Rural, Township, Farm)	
Size of Classrooms	
Teachers Attitude towards University (e.g. Encouraging, not interested)	
1st and 2nd choice undergraduate degree when applying for university. Why these degrees?	
Undergraduate Degree enrolled? Why this degree/diploma?	
University/universities applied to and Why?	
Type of Accommodation (on or off-campus/ Catered or Self Catering)	

Appendix F: Ethical Clearance

EIRA (Ethical Implications of Research Activity) 1PR FORM
This template must be completed and should accompany the transfer report for discussion at the transfer meeting.

Please note that this procedure is intended to help PGR researchers consider ethical implications of research activity. PGR researchers are responsible for deciding, in conjunction with their departmental guidelines and professional disciplinary standards, whether a more extensive review is necessary.

Brief Title of Thesis	**Narrative accounts of failure and success in higher education: Exploring the potentials and limitations of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction in investigating factors potentially contributing to the high dropout rates and low completion rates of undergraduate financial aid students in South African Universities.**
Full name:	**Mukovhe Masutha**
Supervisor(s):	**Professor Rajani Naidoo, Professor Jurgen Enders**

SECTION 1: COMPLETION FOR ALL RESEARCH

Are there ethical implications concerned with the following general issues? If yes, please provide details below	
1. Data storage (eg Confidentiality, availability, length of storage, etc)	All data collected will be stored and backed up safely on the researcher's personal laptop as well as a safe drive storage provided by the university. Code names, passwords and possible encryption will be used to further protect the data and also prohibit access by unauthorized individuals. This is particularly important as the study will make use of students' biographical information that needs to be protected at all times. The researcher will ensure that all audio files from interview recordings are stored securely and renamed for maximum anonymity and security. Data collected will only be used for the purpose it was collected for and kept for as long as necessary Data will only be stored for the duration project with access to it limited to the research team.
2. Are you free to publish the results? eg Are there any restrictions raised by contractual issues?	The researcher is free to publish the results. There are no restrictions imposed by the sponsor or any other body. Research will be conducted within normal scientific and research conventions.
3. Effect on/damage to the environment eg Hazardous waste may be produced; water or air might be polluted; injurious pathogens might be released; damage to ecological systems/habitats.	The project will pose no risks/damage to the environment or those involved

Specific Issues		
4. Does the research involve human participants in any way? (Please note if you are processing personal data you need to tick 'Yes'.)	~~No~~	~~Complete only Section 1~~
	Yes	Complete Sections 1 and 2
5. Does the research involve animals in any way?	No	Complete only Section 1
	~~Yes~~	~~Complete Sections 1 and 3~~

Demonstration of Ethical Considerations
Please outline the ethical issues which will need to be managed during the course of the activity.

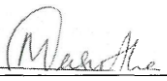
Silverman (2006) emphasizes that ethical considerations are critical to the research process and that poorly thought out ethical strategies can cause significant infringements of participants' rights. Cohen et al (2000) provides key ethical principles that will be considered throughout this study, i.e. 'beneficence', informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Following on these key ethical principles, the researcher will, guided by the University's Code of Good Practice in Research Integrity, take all necessary steps to ensure that no form of personal harm is incurred by the participants. Research participants will be protected from any form of stigmatization, humiliation, trauma, victimization or threat to their security. Throughout the research process, the researcher will not only respect the rights and dignities of all participants but also ensure that the questions of consent, capacity, power relation s, deception, confidentiality and privacy are appropriately addressed. This is very important because participants in in-depth narrative interviews tend to reveal potentially sensitive information about themselves.

Secondly, participants will be given all the necessary information about the project in order to obtain their informed consent about participating in the project. No participant will be coerced or unfairly pressurized in anyway whatsoever. The researcher will make use of a written consent clearly stipulating that participation in the project is be completely voluntary. Participants will be made aware that they are free to withdraw from the project at any stage of the project. A record will be kept show that participants have consented to their data being processed under the Data Protection Act.

Thirdly, the identity and privacy of all research participants will be protected at all times and steps will be taken to ensure that all stakeholders involved will remain anonymous during data collection, storage and analysis. The researcher will achieve this by strictly adhering to the Eight Principles of Data Protection stipulated on the University of Bath's Data Protection Act. Given that the study involves human beings, the researcher will limit the personal information collected to that which is necessary to the project and no irrelevant or excessive information will be retained. All data collected will be stored and backed up safely on the researcher's personal laptop as well as a safe drive storage provided by the university. Code names, passwords and possible encryption will be used to further protect the data and also prohibit access by unauthorized individuals. This is particularly important as the study will make use of students' biographical information that needs to be protected at all times. The researcher will ensure that all audio files from interview recordings are stored securely and renamed for maximum anonymity and security. Data collected will only be used for the purpose it was collected for and kept for as long as necessary.

Declarations
I confirm that the statements in Sections 1-3 describe the ethical issues that will need to be managed during the course of this research activity.

To be completed before the Transfer Meeting

Postgraduate Student	**Signature:**  **Date: 06/10/2016**
Lead Supervisor	**Signature:**  **Date: 06/10/2016**

To be completed at the Transfer Meeting

Transfer Panel Recommendation			
Does the Postgraduate student need to discuss the ethical issues raised in the form with the School of Management's Research Ethical Officer (DREO)?		**No** ☑	**Yes** ☐
Chair of Transfer Panel	**Signature:**  **Date:** 4/11/16	**Name:** RICHARD FARRELLO	

To be completed after the Transfer Meeting by DREO

School of Management's Department Ethical Research Officer (DREO)			
Do the ethical issues raised by this research need to be referred to the School's Research Student Committee?		**No** ☐	**Yes** ☐
Comments			
DREO	**Signature:** **Date:**	**Name:**	

To be completed by the DoS and returned to the Finance and Research Office

Director of Studies	**Signature:** **Date:**	**Name:**

Please submit this form to the graduate Division along with your Transfer Report. Following your Transfer meeting the Chair will send the EIRA1PGR to the School of Management's Departmental Research Ethics Officer on your behalf.

SECTION 2: FOR COMPLETION IF YOUR RESEARCH INVOLVES HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

If any of the answers to these questions are 'yes', please confirm in the space below how the ethical issues will be managed during the course of the activity.

*Compulsory question for consideration by **all PGR** researchers:*

	Yes	No
Will the study involve obtaining or processing personal and other data relating to living individuals, (eg involve recording interviews with subjects even if the findings will subsequently be made anonymous)? *Note: If the answer to this question is 'yes' you will need to ensure that the provisions of the Data Protection Act are complied with. In particular you will need to seek advice to ensure that the subjects provide sufficient consent and that the personal data will be properly stored, for an appropriate period of time). Information is available from the University Data Protection Website and dataprotection-queries@lists.bath.ac.uk*	✓	

Departments may amend the following list to include topics of particular relevance to their discipline(s).

	Yes	No
1. Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent? (eg children, people with learning disabilities)		✓
2. Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited? (eg managers of organisations; community members, students at school, members of self-help group,)		✓
3. Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? (eg covert observation of people in non-public places such as offices, corridors or supermarkets)		✓
4. Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics? (eg sexual activity, drug use)		✓
5. Are drugs, placebos or other substances (eg food substances, vitamins) to be administered to the study participants and/or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind?		✓
6. Will blood or tissue samples be obtained from participants? *Note: If the answer to this question is 'yes' you will need to be aware of obligations under the Human Tissue Act, see further information at http://www.bath.ac.uk/internal/ethics/committee/HTA.html*		✓
7. Is pain or more than very mild discomfort likely to result from the study?		✓
8. Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?		✓
9. Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive testing?		✓
10. Will financial inducements (or other expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?		✓
11. Will the study involve recruitment of patients or staff through the NHS? Note: If the answer to this question is 'yes' you will need to submit an application to the NHS through IRAS, see: http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/applications/integrated-research-application-system/		✓

Section 2: Demonstration of Ethical Considerations

Please complete this section if any of the answers to the above questions are 'yes'.

As stated above, the study will involve the collection of data from humans, through in-depth interviews.

The identity and privacy of all research participants will be protected at all times and steps will be taken to ensure that all stakeholders involved will remain anonymous during data collection, storage and analysis. The researcher will achieve this by strictly adhering to the Eight Principles of Data Protection stipulated on the University of Bath's Data Protection Act. Given that the study involves human beings, the researcher will limit the personal information collected to that which is necessary to the project and no irrelevant or excessive information will be retained. All data collected will be stored and backed up safely on the researcher's personal laptop as well as a safe drive storage provided by the university.

All participants will be given all the necessary information about the project in order to obtain their informed consent about participating in the project. No participant will be coerced or unfairly pressurized in anyway whatsoever. The researcher will make use of a written consent clearly stipulating that participation in the project is be completely voluntary. Code names, passwords and possible encryption will be used to further protect the data and also prohibit access by unauthorized individuals.

Appendix G: Participants' Demographic Information (Students)

Name	**Thabang**
Age	**27**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Ivory Tower University**
Field of Study:	**Psychology**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Rendani**
Age	**24**
Gender	**Female**
University:	**Ivory Tower University**
Field of Study:	**BSc Geography and Geology**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Lerato**
Age	**24**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Bush University**
Field of Study:	**BSc Urban and Regional Planning**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Ranzu**
Age	**21**
Gender	**Female**
University:	**Bush University**
Field of Study:	**BSc Environmental Sciences**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Risuna**
Age	**25**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Merger University**
Field of Study:	
Race	

Name	**Linda**
Age	**25**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Merger University**
Field of Study:	**Public Administration and Governance**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Wadzi**
Age	**19**
Gender	**Female**
University:	**Merger University**
Field of Study:	**BA Tourism**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Naledi**
Age	**18**
Gender	**Female**
University:	**Merger University**
Field of Study:	**B Education**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Tali**
Age	**22**
Gender	**Female**
University:	**Bush University**
Field of Study:	**BA Social Work**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Martin**
Age	**26**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Bush University**
Field of Study:	**BA Criminal Justice**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Mutambi**
Age	**25**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Ivory Tower University**
Field of Study:	**BSc**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Murangi**
Age	**25**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Ivory Tower University**
Field of Study:	**BSc Geography**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Andani**
Age	**24**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Ivory Tower University**
Field of Study:	**BSc GIS and Remote Sensing**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Sibusiso**
Age	**25**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Ivory Tower University**
Field of Study:	**BSc Chemistry**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Muofhe**
Age	**25**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Merger University**
Field of Study:	**B Com Economics**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Mutshidzi**
Age	**23**
Gender	**Female**
University:	**Bush University**
Field of Study:	**BSc**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Denzhe**
Age	**23**
Gender	**Female**
University:	**Bush University**
Field of Study:	**BSc**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Konani**
Age	**24**
Gender	**M**
University:	**Bush University**
Field of Study:	**BSc Environmental Sciences**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Gift**
Age	**20**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Merger University**
Field of Study:	**B Com Accounting**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Mulamuli**
Age	**21**
Gender	**M**
University:	**Bush University**
Field of Study:	**BSc**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Tshifhiwa**
Age	**23**
Gender	**Female**
University:	**Bush University**
Field of Study:	**BSc Geography and GIS**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Kelly**
Age	**28**
Gender	**Female**
University:	**Merger University**
Field of Study:	**B Com Human Resources**
Race	**Black**

Name	**Imelani**
Age	**25**
Gender	**Male**
University:	**Bush University**
Field of Study:	**BSc Environmental Sciences**
Race	**Black**

Appendix H: Participants' Demographic Information (Students)

Name	Joshua
Position	Policy Maker
Institution	Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) (NGO)
Gender	Male

Name	Martin
Position	Manager and Policy Maker
Institution	National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSAFS)
Gender	Male

Name	Professor Ngoye
Position	Head of School
Institution	Merger University
Gender	Male

Name	Professor Benson
Position	Academic Staff
Institution	Bush University
Gender	Male

Name	Professor Shulman
Position	Academic Staff
Institution	Merger University
Gender	Female

Name	Professor Cooper
Position	Academic Staff
Institution	Ivory Tower University
Gender	Female

Name	Dr Kigali
Position	Senior Lecturer
Institution	Ivory Tower University
Gender	Female

Name	Ms Parker
Position	Senior Manager
Institution	Ivory Tower University
Gender	Female

Name	Ms Lugisani
Position	Student Union Leader
Institution	Bush University
Gender	Female

Name	Dr Kate
Position	Senior Manager and Policy Maker
Institution	Merger University /NSFAS
Gender	Female

Name	Ms Aluna
Position	Support Staff / Food Bank Manager
Institution	Ivory Tower University
Gender	Female

Name	Ms Modise
Position	NSFAS Administrator
Institution	Bush University
Gender	Female

Name	Professor Ndebvu
Position	Senior Manager
Institution	Merger University
Gender	Male

Name	Dr Miri
Position	Senior Lecturer
Institution	Bush University
Gender	Male

Name	Professor Lwandani
Position	Head of School
Institution	Merger University
Gender	Male

Name	Dr Miri
Position	Senior Lecturer
Institution	Bush University
Gender	Male

Name	Prof Meena
Position	Senior Lecturer
Institution	Ivory Tower University
Gender	Female

Name	Mr Goodman
Position	Student Leader
Institution	Ivory Tower University
Gender	Male

Name	Ms Luyanda
Position	Student Leader
Institution	Ivory Tower University
Gender	Female

Name	Ms Ingrid
Position	Senior Lecturer
Institution	Ivory Tower University
Gender	Female

Name	Dr Langulani
Position	Senior Lecturer and Support Staff
Institution	Bush University
Gender	Female

Name	Dr Francis
Position	Senior Lecturer and Support Staff

Institution	Bush University
Gender	Female

Name	Mr Modima
Position	Junior Lecturer
Institution	Bush University
Gender	Male

Name	Ms Khephisi
Position	Junior Lecturer
Institution	Bush University
Gender	Female